FRIDAY THE 13TH
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THE JASON STRAIN
WELCOME TO CRYSTAL LAKE. STAY FOREVER...
A NOVEL BY CHRISTA FAUST
BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION PICTURE
FRIDAY THE 13TH CREATED BY VICTOR MILLER

ONE

Dina stood alone on a narrow dirt path that wound its way between mossy ancient trees, the feeble beam of her flashlight barely penetrating the evergreen gloom. Dina was a hardcore, born-again urbanite, and she hated all this business with bugs and dirt and greenery. She had been born out in the boonies, but had been living in the neon jungle for so long that she'd cultivated a city girl's contempt for the so-called "great outdoors". She had been assured repeatedly that this creepy midnight hike would be more than worth her while. Standing there, shivering in the unseasonable chill, she wasn't so sure.

The woods were utterly silent—a tense, expectant hush, which rattled Dina's nerves and made her anxious heart seem boom-box loud inside her head. There was no familiar night orchestra of small creatures looking for love, killing and being killed. The whole area around the lake seemed unnaturally deserted, forsaken by any living thing. Except, of course, for the ever-present mosquitoes. Damn bugs never did seem to get enough of her blood. When she was a kid, her mom used to say the bugs loved her because she was so sweet. At that moment she'd have given anything to be bitter. She slapped her bare thigh and scratched at a bite below the hem of her too short shorts, wondering where the hell Brian had gone to.

He had been right behind her.

"Brian?" she called, the flashlight beam jittering nervously over gnarled trunks, and branches like crooked, reaching fingers. "Brian, come on."

When rough hands gripped her from behind, her first instinct was to let her attacker have it with a swift elbow. Of course, she knew it had to be Brian, so she reminded herself of why she was here and then let out a cute, girly shriek, dropping her flashlight to the ground.

"Boo!" Brian said, chuckling and slipping a hand up under her tank top.

"Loser," Dina cried, rolling her eyes and pushing him away. "Grow up!"

She bent to retrieve her flashlight, making sure Brian got a nice eyeful of the firm cheeks of her ass beneath the low-slung shorts. He was the first guy she had ever dated that she also worked with. While she had originally been somewhat unsure of the idea, he was awfully sexy: strong, well-trained body with wide shoulders and a lean waist; handsome but rugged face, not too pretty; dark eyes and a goofy, self-deprecating sense of humor. She found herself wondering if tonight would be the night that she would finally give in and sleep with him.

"What? Did you think I was... Jason?" Brian smirked, smacking her affectionately on the derrière. "Back from the grave and looking for action?"

"You and that Jason Voorhees bullshit." Dina rolled her eyes dramatically as she straightened back up. "You don't really believe those campfire fairy tales, do you?"

"Sure I do," Brian replied. "See, way back in nineteen fifty-seven, this freaky, deformed kid drowned in Crystal Lake because his slutty counselors were too busy making the beast with two backs to keep an eye on him."

Dina rolled her eyes again and tried to pretend she wasn't really listening, but she couldn't help being morbidly fascinated by the grisly tale.

"A year later," Brian continued with relish, "those same counselors got offed by some unknown assailant. It wasn't until seventy-nine when some optimistic dope tried to reopen Camp Crystal Lake that they finally figured out what was really going on. Not until a whole new generation of sluts and their horny boyfriends got butchered, of course."

"So you're saying it was the freaky kid, this Jason Voorhees, that killed them?" Dina said.

"No," Brian replied, grinning smugly. "Not yet anyway."

Dina raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"It was his psycho mom, Pamela, who wanted revenge for her son's untimely death," he explained. "She's the one who killed the first two

rounds of unlucky teenagers. That was before a little hottie named Alice chopped off her head and Junior took up the family vendetta."

"How could he?" Dina said. "I thought you said he drowned."

"Nope." Brian obviously loved this long-winded discourse on the Voorhees history. "Somehow, against all odds, Jason survived and grew to maturity, skulking around the lake, feeding off whatever he could catch and kill, waiting for another gang of promiscuous teenagers to show up. Then it's all mayhem and mutilation until, after several near misses, our boy in the second hand hockey mask finally gets his clock cleaned by, of all people, a twelve year-old boy."

"Great," Dina smirked. "If a twelve year-old could kill him, I guess we've got nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, well that was before he came back from beyond the grave, reanimated by a bolt of lightning."

Brian hooked spooky fingers up around his face, casting monster shadows in the flashlight's beam.

"Get real," Dina said. "What is he, Frankenstein? You've got to be kidding."

"I swear it's true," Brian said, his eyes wide and earnest. "I guess you can't keep a bad man down."

"And I'm supposed to believe that he keeps on coming back, over and over."

"No one really knows what keeps him coming back," Brian said. "Is it some kind of demonic energy? Hatred so powerful even death can't stop it? Is there anything left of the young, scared kid he once was inside that rotting, murderous hulk, or have all the years of madness and killing transformed him into some... unstoppable force of evil?"

Dina shook her head, smiling slightly. "Unstoppable force of evil, eh?" she said. "Keep up that yakking and I'll have to come up with something else for you to do with your mouth."

"Promise?" Brian grinned, snaking an arm around her waist as they walked.

"Look." Dina pointed through the trees. "There it is."

"Crystal Lake," Brian said.

The trees parted, revealing a shimmering black mirror of sleek, moonlit water.

"It's beautiful," Dina said softly, surprised at how the stunning view had managed to dig up under her cherished urban cynicism.

"You're beautiful," Brian replied, sliding his arms around her waist.

"It's hard to believe in all those gory stories," Dina said. "Slaughtered camp counselors, dismembered coeds and all that. This place seems so... I don't know. So peaceful."

"Now who needs something to do with their mouth?"

Dina smiled. "Kiss me."

She didn't need to ask twice.

In the heat of that embrace, with the feel of Brian's strong hands sliding up over her breasts, teasing her sensitive nipples gently, all those awful stories seemed to melt away. She knew it would be good with him, she could tell by the way his slow, confident fingers traveled across her hungry skin. He was an excellent kisser. She could feel herself giving in to the gravity of desire, but she knew there were other things that needed to be dealt with first, so she forced herself to pull back and away from Brian.

"Okay, tiger," Dina said. "I think you need to cool down."

She stepped away from him, backing down the dock. "How about a nice cool dip?" she asked, pulling her tank top over her head, exposing her lean, flat belly and braless breasts. Her pale nipples stood out stiff in the cool night air and she flashed a challenging smile.

"If you're trying to cool me off," Brian said, "you're failing miserably."

"Come on," she said, skinning her shorts down her strong thighs and kicking them away. "What are you afraid of? Jason?"

A frown passed over Brian's face as she took a step closer to the edge of the dock. "Come on, Dina," he said, his voice tight with suppressed anxiety. "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Scaredy cat," she said, turning away from him and raising her hands above her head.

She was aware of his eyes on her body as she stood, poised naked in the moonlight. She worked out daily and was proud of her well-toned curves. She loved to show off, loved feeling men's eyes on her.

She was the only woman at her unfeminine job and had almost no female friends. Those were the kind of odds she preferred. Her exposed flesh shivered into goose bumps as she stretched up to her toes and dived into the calm, dark water.

Swimming through the cool blackness of the lake was almost like floating weightless through space. Total sensory deprivation. On land, it had been easy to brush off Brian's bloody and preposterous stories. In the unbroken darkness of the surrounding water, Dina found her mind elaborating on those stories, painting lurid pictures of the hockey mask clad predator stirring in the inky silt, drawn like a shark toward her warm living scent. She broke the surface, shuddering.

At first she was turned around, facing away from the dock. All around the lake, nothing but silent, brooding and unbroken woods, giving away nothing. She turned back to find the dock deserted.

"Brian?" she called.

Her voice echoed across the water and bounced back to mock the pinched squeak of anxiety in the second syllable.

"Brian, quit screwing around!" She pushed wet blonde hair from her face and dunked her head backward to slick it back. Lake water trickled into her mouth and she spat, imagining she could detect an unwholesome, rotten flavor beneath the cool metallic taste. "This isn't funny." Nothing. Just mocking silence. "You think you're getting any now, you—"

Something touched her leg. Whatever she was going to say was swallowed in a high, breathless gasp. She spun her body away from the stealthy touch.

Was it the cool, sleek body of a fish? A clump of aquatic weeds? Cold, dead fingers?

She felt it again, this time distressingly high up on the inside of her naked thigh. She made no sound, bit her lip and began swimming toward the shore with strong, quick strokes. She was less than halfway back when whatever was beneath her had enough of teasing, clamping down like a metal shackle around her slender ankle.

Dina grunted with surprise and fear, kicking back with her free leg as hard as she could. She barely had time to suck in a desperate

breath before she was yanked down roughly, water closing over her head.

In the black airlessness beneath the surface of the lake, terror and panic short-circuited Dina's thoughts completely. Acting on pure instinct, she kicked out again and this time felt the heel of her foot connect with something hard and smooth. A jolt of pain shot up her leg, but the grip on her other ankle slackened and she wrenched free and shot to the surface, letting out a howl that was half terror and half fury. Muscles jacked on adrenaline moved her through the water like a torpedo, and in seconds she was pulling herself up onto the dock.

Her clothes were gone.

She wasted a few precious moments in a futile search, but it was clear that her clothing had been deliberately taken. She would have to run, naked and shoeless, or fall victim to—

She heard a gentle splashing, fat droplets of water falling back into the lake. When she turned, what she saw rising from the dark water burned itself into her consciousness forever.

All the details of Brian's story were there: the cracked and ancient hockey mask, slimed with dying algae; the ichors of decomposition; tattered and ill-fitting work shirt and pants stained black with dried blood; and the dull gleam of the pitted and battle-scarred machete. But nothing could have prepared her for the sheer bulk of the massive shoulders, enormous hands and the misshapen head, like a rotting pumpkin left out on the porch long after Halloween, sitting atop his linebacker's physique. And the eye—the single, visible eye, burning with such a cold fury that it took Dina's breath away. She never considered herself to be a helpless girly girl. She had been in more than her share of violent interpersonal encounters and was well trained in a hundred ways to disarm an attacker of any size. But this, this was so utterly wrong, so beyond the realm of the possible that she stood there, mesmerized as he pulled himself up onto the dock.

Jason, she thought. It really was Jason.

She knew what she had to do, but her body seemed sluggish and unresponsive, reluctant to obey. He was less than six feet away when she was finally able to do the only thing she could do.

She ran.

Racing through the dark woods, her bare feet torn and her naked flesh whipped by clutching branches, Dina hoped desperately that she was going the right way. She was pretty sure she recognized the tree on her left, split into two like thick, upside down legs, but she could hear Jason crashing through the woods behind her like an enraged Grizzly, closing the distance between them with the relentless inevitability of a nightmare, and it was easy to let panic win. She jammed her fear down inside herself and forced her legs to double their speed.

Almost there, she thought. Almost...

Ahead of her were two huge perfect oak trees, side by side like temple columns. She'd never been so happy to see anything in her life. She made for the trees like a football player going for the winning touchdown, teeth clenched and breath burning in her heaving chest.

"Now!" she cried as she came barreling between the trees.

Jason came through seconds later and a weighted steel net dropped down over him.

Arc lights flooded the scene as SWAT armored men poured from the surrounding woods like angry ants, each drawing a bead on the dirty white hockey mask beneath the steel net. Jason flailed with soundless fury as a pair of finger-sized tranquilizer darts embedded themselves in the cold flesh of his neck.

Dina quickly found her stash of extra clothing and gear. She barely had time to fasten the Velcro on her Kevlar vest when she heard a high, womanish shriek, followed by a deafening burst of gunfire.

She was still barefoot when she spun to see one of her team go down in a showy gush of arterial spray. Jason had torn through the steel mesh like it was lingerie, easily freeing his machete hand and slicing the man's throat to the bone.

"Kenworth!" Dina called to her team leader. "Foam!"

Reid Kenworth was not a man who got flustered when the shit hit the fan. He nodded tersely and tossed Dina a device that looked like a space-age backpack vacuum cleaner.

Meanwhile, two other men were dragging their dying buddy out of the fray while Brian and several others emptied their clips into Jason's uncaring bulk. Jason shrugged off the bullets as if they were mosquitoes, and easily pulled himself completely free of the netting, slashing the face of the man to his right, then sinking his machete deep into Brian's muscular thigh. Brian clutched at his bleeding leg and tumbled awkwardly backward, directly into his teammate's line of fire. Bullets flattened themselves against his Kevlar and he grunted, collapsing semiconscious to the ground.

"Hold your fire!" Kenworth called.

Panic reigned over the harshly lit, chaotic scene as Jason advanced on the terrified shooters, calm and undaunted.

"I said hold your goddamn fire!" Kenworth shouted. "We don't want to damage the merchandise."

"Get back," Dina hollered, gripping the nozzle that protruded from the backpack-like device. "Get the fuck back!"

She stepped fearlessly into Jason's path and pulled the trigger on the heavy nozzle.

Jason staggered back as he was blasted with thick, sticky gray foam. As the gunk enveloped him, his movement slowed, his massive body immobilized by the gluey strands until he fell forward like a chainsawed redwood.

Dina struggled to slow her breathing as they all watched silently, waiting to see what would happen next. Jason struggled against the hardening foam for another thirty seconds and eventually went totally still.

"Is he tranqued?" Dina asked.

Kenworth stepped forward and toed the side of Jason's malformed head. No reaction. Kenworth nodded.

"Okay," Kenworth said. "Sanders and Polk, get Thompson and Jacowitz stabilized and to the medic ASAP. Beck, Levin and deVeer, help me secure the target and get him ready to move." He paused and put a big hand on Dina's trembling shoulder. "Good job, Ridgeway."

Dina watched as Polk tore off a piece of his shirt and wrapped it around Brian's bleeding thigh. Brian's face was as white as cottage

cheese and shined with sweat. His teeth were locked down tight against the unendurable agony. His eyes met Dina's, wide with pain and fear. Dina looked away.

"Thank you, sir," she said, softly.

TWO

Caleb Carson perched on the edge of his ergonomically streamlined glass and steel spaceship of a desk. He simultaneously forked up mouthfuls of blood-rare Kobe beef from a plastic takeout container, wriggled out of his sweaty, metallic pewter silk dress shirt by Manny Kwan and shouted into his high-tech, wireless headset.

"Fuck what Ketchner says! Who died and made him Aaron Spelling? It's my fucking show and I call the shots. *Xtreme Elimination* is the highest rated reality series in history. Period. What part of 'forty-two share' don't you understand? Bullshit. No, that's bullshit. Ketchner doesn't know shit about what young audiences want to see."

Caleb flung the shirt across the room where it hung precariously off one of the pointy, expensive art things that had come with the office. He wished for a childish moment that it would fall off its pedestal and smash to bits. "Well, he can take his 'serious moral doubts' and go work for the fucking Weather Channel." He began to pace furiously. "Look, the network isn't gonna listen to him. The network is my bitch. They love me. They might throw Ketchner a bone or two every now and then because he had a few hits back in dinosaur times, but I'm the one who put the X Network on the fucking map. Before me they were nothing but no holds barred fighting, Z-grade horror movies and soft-core, silicone rodeos. Hang on..."

His honey-voiced secretary had the casting agent on the line, so he sloughed off the anxious producer and had the other call punched through.

"Celia, baby. Where's my new spokestramp? There's a serious titty deficiency in my office right now." He frowned. "Look, I don't care if she's got fucking Ebola, we're in crunch time here. Period. No. I want her topless in my office in half an hour or she'll be lucky to get fluffer work in gangbang pornos."

He picked up the glossy headshot of the flu-stricken spokesmodel from his desk. She was hot enough: all perky capped teeth and over-

glossed collagen lips under big, layered, streaky blonde hair, but there was something kind of desperate in her bright, contact-blue eyes that said she was only weeks away from her spoilage date. He turned the photo over and read her stats again. Twenty-three? Jesus, she was nearly his age. Practically ready for the old sluts home. What the hell had he been thinking?

"No, you know what? Never mind," he said. "Tell her to stay home and get me twenty-five new head shots. I don't want to see anyone over twenty-one."

He looked up at a large map of Isla Negra, the desolate island off Costa Rica where the new season of *Xtreme Elimination* would be filmed.

"And screw these generic California blondes. That was fine for the first season, but for Isla Negra I want a Latina girl," he said. "That's the way to go on this one. Get me some kind of smoking hot, retro, J-Lo, cha-cha fuckbunny. But remember, I need you to think in terms of tits. Only C cup or higher. And make sure they'll do topless. That's absolutely critical. I want a line of Latina titties around the block by tomorrow noon. Celia, you're a goddess. What about our cons?"

Caleb walked over to the massive closet at the far end of the office and pulled out a brand new shirt without looking at it.

"That's my girl," he said. "Did you get the *Cold Creek* chick? How about that great rapist, the one from *Sixty Minutes* with the crazy eyes and the facial tic? How many? Love it. Yeah, perfect." He got halfway up the buttons on his shirt before he realized they were misaligned. He cursed under his breath and started over. "Great. Outstanding. That's what I like to hear. Now what about my hero? You know it all falls apart without the Butcher." He squeezed his eyes closed and clenched both fists, chin tilted up in a silent posture of victory as his mouth shaped the word "yes". "Out fucking standing. Celia, you're in my will. I'll have something sent over. Fab. Nine-thirty? Great. Ciao, baby."

Caleb finished off the last few mouthfuls of his low-carb dinner and turned toward the full-length mirror inside the open closet door. The new shirt was a kind of bright, pumpkin orange. Sure, it was well cut from a soft, comfortable fabric, but with his black pants it made

him feel like a Halloween decoration. He made a mental note to fire his stylist and tossed the orange shirt on top of the dirty pewter one. He had told that ditzy fudgepacker a billion times: no bright colors. Caleb was a showrunner, not a fucking circus clown. He liked gray, black, maybe a stormy sort of blue or subtle green every once in a while. But orange? He understood that it was important to wear the hottest designers and the most cutting edge styles, but he wasn't willing to look like a goddamn jack-o'-lantern.

Shirtless, he turned sideways and eyed his abs. Was he getting softer? He would be turning twenty-five this year. A quarter of a century. Half way to fifty. Practically ancient. He shuddered and buzzed his secretary

Gerda had the looks of a porn star genetically engineered by Nazis from the year five thousand. Strapping, Teutonic perfection, with a flawless supermodel's face, bone-crushing thighs and astonishingly perky, natural breasts. Caleb felt himself stiffen slightly at the sight of her.

"Gerda, I need you to fire Roberto and get me a new stylist. A chick this time, okay? Someone hot, under thirty with a decent bod and no glasses. Send Celia an extra large gift basket from Claudine's and get me a stairmaster machine for the office."

"Yes, sir," she said. "Anything else, sir?"

Caleb looked at his Rolex. An hour and twenty minutes till Celia arrived with the con audition tapes. He still needed to find out what the hold up was with the visas for the Isla Negra set-up crew and figure a way to placate the bean counters and get the equipment costs down to somewhere less than twenty-five thousand over budget. Plus Taxler-Sloane and the Kodiak Beer people were having second thoughts about "associating their product with this kind of graphic violence". Clearly they needed a little extra romancing to counter the latest letter-writing avalanche from Christian Mommies Against Caleb's New Hummer. What part of thirty million viewers didn't they understand? You can't argue with those kinds of numbers. The Christian Mommies don't drink beer anyway, so what do they care? Caleb looked back at Gerda's proud German nipples

poking defiantly through her paper-thin, white satin blouse. He figured he could spare five minutes.

"Gerda?"

"Sir?"

"Do my abs look soft to you?"

She smiled and stepped forward, placed her slim, manicured hand on his bare chest. Her perfect oval nails slid down the vertical bilateral groove that ran from beneath his sternum to the waistband of his pants.

"No, sir," she said, unbuckling his trendy crocodile belt and dropping gracefully to her knees.

It ended up being more like ten minutes because he was so distracted, but Caleb made the best of the time by clicking on the video footage of Isla Negra, reviewing notes from the location scout while Gerda did her magic. Towards the end, when she got particularly vigorous, Caleb lost track of things for a moment and had to press his palms back on the desktop to keep his balance.

"Thanks, Gerda," he said as she stood and straightened her tight skirt. "Now be a doll and bring me another espresso, will you? Make it a double."

She nodded and slipped away silently while he rewound the footage he had missed. He didn't even notice when she returned with his espresso.

The island was absolutely perfect foreboding, misty and ancient, like *Jurassic Park*, but somehow less hospitable. There were fresh water streams and lots of food possibilities as long as you weren't too squeamish, but the terrain was difficult, rocky and desolate to the east and choked with jungle to the west. The first season of *Xtreme Elimination* had taken place on a jagged chunk of rock off the coast of Nova Scotia, and the frigid wind and lack of fresh water had been major factors in wearing down the contestants. On Isla Negra, it would be sweltering in the day, but cool at night. There would be water, but there would also be Montezuma's revenge. There'd be plenty of edible plants, but as many that were deadly poisonous. There were dangerous fauna, tropical parasites and, of course, one other special guest, to make things interesting.

It was always hard to find ways to up the ante. The first season had been a sensation, a runaway smash hit that totally changed the face of network television. XBC was the little network that could, a scrappy, pint-sized David going up against the ancient Goliaths that made up the holy TV trinity of the Big Three, but *Xtreme Elimination* was no meager sling—it was a fucking bazooka. It mowed down everything in its path, terminating all the top rated shows with extreme prejudice because *Xtreme Elimination* didn't pull any punches. *Xtreme Elimination* was the real McCoy. A dozen death row inmates on a deserted island and the last one left alive gets his sentence downgraded to life in a cushy federal pen.

Simple, brutal and hypnotically addictive, the viewing public could not get enough. The other networks were falling all over themselves to copy the format and expectations for the new season were in the stratosphere. The pressure was on. Caleb had only been in the business for three short years, but he knew how fickle this kind of success could be. You could be on top of the world one day and dumped like yesterday's Caesar salad the next. There were no guarantees.

Initially there had been some resistance to his suggestion of a coed battle. Maybe all girls could work, but would the viewing public really want to watch men kill women? Absolutely, Caleb argued. He had couched the pitch with a lot of pseudo-feminist sugar to help the medicine go down, but he and the network execs both knew that the lion's share of XBC's demographic was young and male. The renaissance of Eighties-style bikini slasher films was at its zenith and when dealing with the masses, you couldn't beat the billion-dollar combo.

Sex and violence.

Tits and axes.

Americans loved tits, but they hated them too. Slutty, tit-flashing women needed to be punished for their cock teasing ways. With men and women together, there would have to be hanky panky at some point. Caleb was sure that the punitive "you fuck, you die" mentality would carry the new season into the record books, and he had the perfect guest star to take it to the next level of misogynistic brutality.

Almost as if reading his mind, Gerda buzzed him with Reid Kenworth on the phone.

"Kenworth," Caleb said into his headset. "How's my big star? Resting comfortably in his trailer?"

Kenworth's voice was faint and staticky. "He's out all right, but the bastard gave us a hell of a fight." Kenworth paused, his voice tight. "Carson, we've had casualties."

Casualties. Caleb sighed. Great. There goes the budget.

"Fine," he said. "Just give Gerda a figure and I'll have a second check cut first thing tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir," Kenworth said. "We're only forty minutes off schedule, but we should be able to make time on the transport and have him at the airfield, prepped to fly by zero two hundred hours."

"Good man," Caleb said and hung up.

It was going to be a great season.

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When Celia arrived with the tapes, Caleb swept her into a bear hug, squeezing her and lifting her off her little pink and white Nike cross trainers. She was a tiny, maternal-looking Jewish lady in her late forties, dressed in sporty gym togs and lugging a Haliburton case filled with tapes instead of stacks of drug money. She giggled and demanded that Caleb put her down.

"Pumping iron now, are you Celia?" Caleb asked. "Come on, let me feel your biceps."

She swatted his hand away and shook her head. "Enough with you. Right, okay. I got thirty cons, twenty men and ten women."

Caleb offered Celia a seat and she handed him a tape.

"So the women were tough, huh?" Caleb asked, slipping the tape into his machine.

"Tough?" Celia shook her head. "Are you kidding? I can't believe we found this many."

Caleb nodded and hit play. He had anticipated that difficulty from the beginning. Even with the recent nationwide acceptance of the death penalty in every state except Massachusetts, the female talent

pool left a lot to be desired. Women often killed with subtler, less aggressive means: poison, shooting someone in their sleep, suffocation. Their victims were most often children or other weaker individuals. That kind of killer wouldn't last five minutes on *Xtreme Elimination*.

The first woman up on Celia's tape was a sultry brunette with a fabulous rack beneath her safety-orange, prison issue shirt.

"Nice," Caleb said. "Gimme the stats."

"Felice Delacoste," Celia told him, reading from a thick file in her lap. "Florida. Honeymoon killer. Y'know, standard black widow type."

"MO?"

"Slit the victims' throats in the shower and then dissolved them in acid."

"Not bad."

Caleb listened for half a second to Felice's prepared speech about why she should be chosen for *Xtreme Elimination*. Her voice sounded like the breathy, phone sex voiceover in some men's deodorant commercial, and she was all juicy seduction in her body language. Probably wouldn't last five minutes, but might make a photogenic victim and would almost definitely try to screw someone at some point.

"Put her in the maybe pile," Caleb said.

"Right," Celia replied, making neat little notes in her file.

"Whoa!" Caleb said when the next woman came up. "You're telling me that's a chick?"

"Yup," Celia said. "I think she's a definite maybe."

"Okay," Caleb said, taking in the huge, butch African-American woman currently eye-fucking the camera. "Let's hear it."

"Monique 'Big Mo' Willis. A real tough broad, ran with bangers, rap sheet a mile long. Killed her prostitute girlfriend with an iron after a three day freebasing marathon."

"A tire iron?"

Celia shook her head. "An iron like you use to iron your clothes."

"Was it hot? Plugged in?"

Celia nodded.

"Holy shit," Caleb said. "I love her."

"Thought you might," Celia replied.

After "Big Mo" was Danisha Scott, a nurse who had done in a busload of droolers at the home for mentally disabled adults where she had been employed for seven years. She was fat, but looked strong as an ox and had a steely, merciless gaze that Caleb went nuts over.

"Love the medical angle too," Caleb said. "Fabulicious! Who's next?"

The next two were duds in Caleb's opinion, understudies at best. But the one after that was Caleb's dream date, his number one gal.

"Hello, Valkyrie!" he said as the big blonde appeared on the screen.

She could have been prettier, true, but Caleb knew she was the one. He could smell it as sure as he had been able to smell that the first season of *Xtreme Elimination* would be a hit. She had ruddy, white trash skin, white-blonde hair, and eyelashes so pale they were nearly invisible around her Aryan blue eyes. She was tall, but slightly dumpy around the hips and thighs, and her features were long and horse-like, with way too much gum between her teeth and her lips. Still, she looked better than a playboy bunny to Caleb. She looked like a million bucks. Or fifty million.

"Val's a no-brainer," Celia said. "A shoe in. I think she could be our winner."

"Think she can take the Butcher?"

Celia nodded. "With a little help, no question."

"We need a female winner," Caleb said emphatically. "If we're gonna justify the coed format. Besides it's a slasher movie cliché. The one girl always survives."

"Right," Celia replied.

"So what all do you have on our proud 'lady?"

"Valkyrie Randall, only daughter of Cold Creek Militia founder, Bill Randall. She killed three—count 'em—three ATF agents with a humble buck knife when they came to raid daddy's compound. She was nineteen. Trained as a survivalist since before she could walk, there is no doubt that Val has the skills to ace the season."

She was also a rabid racist and anti-Semite, which Caleb knew was bound to stir up lots of yummy controversy. Few things put asses in front of screens like controversy

Val was such a home run that the woman up next took Caleb totally by surprise.

"What? Are you kidding me?" Caleb asked, frowning at the hideous, bovine creature that shambled onto the screen.

"Just hear me out on this one, honey," Celia said. "This is Sissy Keen. Baby killer."

"Baby killer?" Caleb sneered. "That doesn't do me a damn bit of good. There are no babies on *Xtreme Elimination*, Celia. I thought we were on the same page about baby killers."

"I know, I know, but this one is different."

"I don't know..."

He looked back at the gap-toothed, hillbilly nightmare grinning amiably at the camera and waving like a cheerful kid on her way to Disneyland. Her blonde hair was lank and greasy around her fat, piggy face. One eye wandered far to the left as she spoke in a thick, barely intelligible drawl, twisting a lock of hair in a flirtatious, almost coquettish fashion that seemed utterly wrong coming from such a beast. Her body was thick and mannish, shaped like an overstuffed laundry bag. She had no more breasts than a man of her weight and there were dark concentric sweat stains around the pits of her orange prison shirt.

"She's been living alone in this Appalachian backwoods cabin, totally self-sufficient, since she was fifteen. She butchers her own pigs. Alone, Caleb. Ever tried that? A grown sow can weigh over four hundred pounds. In a way, she's a lot like Val. She's got survival skills out the wazoo."

"Okay," Caleb said. "I'm listening.

"Here's the best part. She had four different babies by four different men."

"You mean someone actually fucked that?" Caleb shuddered, his testicles crawling with revulsion.

"Apparently so." Celia shrugged. "But listen, the first three babies all died before their first birthdays, supposedly from Sudden Infant

Death Syndrome. Authorities didn't get suspicious until after the fourth kid turned out not to be dead after all and they found evidence of attempted suffocation."

"That's all ducky, but I still don't see *Xtreme Elimination* material."

"I'm getting there," Celia said. "After her conviction, an attempt was made to locate the father of the surviving baby. What do you know?" She paused dramatically. "No one has seen the guy since his date with Sissy. In fact, no one has seen any of the sperm donors after Sissy had her way with them."

"Now I'm interested," Caleb said.

"They never found any bodies, but get this they analyzed the feces from her pigs and found traces of digested human proteins. Nobody knows how many guys she fed to those pigs. I think she could be a contender."

"Celia, baby," Caleb said. "That's why you get the big bucks. I'm sold."

Next up was a Latina gang girl named Teresa "T-Rex" Ramirez. She had killed a rival gang member by ripping the girl's throat out with her teeth. She won Caleb over in under a minute with her haughty Aztec beauty and her famous cannibal smile. Another no-brainer.

Last up was another possible winner. Alexandra Coyle, female body builder. Killed her boyfriend and the boyfriend's side dish with her bare hands, took out the luckless gardener and a fucking police dog while she was at it, and, after being shot twice, went on to break the neck of a police officer attempting to subdue her.

"My kinda girl," Caleb said.

On screen she was clearly smaller than in the monstrous, steroidal competition photos Celia had brought along, but she still looked lean and hard, arms more ripped than his. Dark brown hair and feral, gray-green eyes, she wasn't girly pretty, but there was something arresting and hypnotic in her gaze. She spoke softly, but intensely, her voice deep and whisky-rough. At first, Caleb wondered if she still had it in her to kill without the chemical roid rage that had driven her murder spree the first time around. As he watched her speak

about how she would stop at nothing to succeed on *Xtreme Elimination*, he started to get that feeling that indefinable buzz that said "ratings". The sub-aural hum of success. The thought of her and Val Randall dueling it out to the death made his custom tailored trousers fit funny.

"Yes," Caleb said. "Absolutely. She's a keeper."

Celia nodded knowingly and made another note in her folder. "So, ready for boys?"

Caleb buzzed Gerda for more espresso and settled in to watch the men.

There were far more to choose from in the men's division. Stand outs included the Sixty Minutes rapist, Billy Dean Whitcomb; notorious gang leader AK Henrow; a brilliant FBI agent turned serial killer, whose story could have made its own hit movie; and, of course, the man of the hour, the one and only Butch "the Butcher" Mahan. Full-contact fighter, martial artist and lady-killer. On death row for offing two broads the night of his last big win in Vegas, cutting them up like Sissy's pigs and decorating the complimentary high-roller suite at the MGM Grand with their steaming entrails. The Butcher was already a television celebrity with a built-in fan base, and there was no doubt that he had what it took to win. Caleb had gone through hell to get him. Looking at his audition tape made Caleb's heart slam dance in his chest. Mahan was a brute, a million dollar killer. He was pure ratings. He was perfect.

Caleb rounded out the men's roster with a Vietnamese gangbanger named Vu van Trung and a Mexican drug runner named Beto Nuñez. He made Celia read him back the lucky dozen. Feeling like a million bucks, Caleb kissed Celia goodbye and ordered another espresso. Ratings gold. No question. *Xtreme Elimination* 2 would be the best yet. No fucking question.

THREE

Butch "the Butcher" Mahan sat silently in his seven and a half by nine and a half foot cell at the Nevada State Correctional Facility, Ely. He was staring down at his hands. Dark eyes, broken nose and a rough, concrete complexion beneath close-cropped, reddish blond hair, he was a thick, burly man with scarred knuckles and a quiet, melancholy demeanor that belied his gruesome nickname. Butch was the same age as Caleb Carson, but they could not have been more different.

Butch was allowed to have exactly twenty personal photographs in his cell. He only had two. There were only two that mattered anyway. The first was an old, faded shot of a goofy twelve year-old Butch with his skinny arms around his grandma's waist. Grandma Patti was in one of her awful, slutty pop star outfits and flashing a big smile like she was on the cover of People magazine. She was the only person who had ever really been nice to him during his lonely and confusing childhood.

He went to live with her out in Flushing, Queens when he was ten. Before that, he and his alcoholic mother lived in a one-room rat trap in Hoboken, New Jersey. He never knew his father. One chilly winter night, his mother went out on a date and never came back. Butch ran out of food after four days and started stealing from the other kids' lunches at school. When the landlady came around asking about the overdue rent, Butch kept telling her his mom would pay as soon as she got back from vacation. The landlady was appalled that he had been left alone, but he insisted he was not a baby and that he took care of himself most of the time anyway. When pressed for details regarding when his mother would return or even where she was, he was vague and often contradicted himself. Eventually, the landlady called the Child Protective Services and Butch got sent to live with Grandma Patti.

It was the first time he had ever met Grandma Patti. She and Butch's mother had had some kind of blow out years before. Patti hadn't even known that Butch existed. Still, she gave him a big hug as

soon as she saw him standing in the social worker's office and said how handsome he was, even if he was a little thin. She told him how she couldn't wait to catch up. Those were her exact words. Catch up. She was wearing this huge, furry, fake leopard coat and her big, warm, perfume-drenched hug felt so good that Butch started crying.

It was the first hug he'd ever had.

He was happy with Grandma Patti for the next three years. When the older kids would tease him and call him names, Grandma Patti used to squat down on her clunky high-heels, take both his shoulders in her hands and say, "Don't you listen to them, Butchie boy. You are who you want to be, you hear me. You choose, not them."

She'd died of cancer less than a year after that photo had been taken. She had known that she was sick but had been hiding it from Butch. Her death hit him like a speeding train.

At that point, thirteen year-old Butch had already discovered better living through chemistry. He found Grandma Patti's pain pills and mixed them liberally with pilfered alcohol. It was as if the alcohol was something his body had been missing all this time and immediately recognized, like some critical vitamin that had been previously deficient.

Butch was utterly mystified by girls, and his few fumbling encounters with the supposedly fair sex were all humiliating disasters, but his first shot of Jack Daniels was love at first taste. He remembered nothing of Grandma Patti's funeral or the days that followed. The next solid memory he had was of shaving his hair into a Mohawk with a dull safety razor in a Burger King rest room. Painfully shy and ravaged by radioactive acne, Butch struggled to find some way to be cool and make friends, but he found only mocking rejection everywhere he turned.

So he drank. Not with friends, not at parties or in bars, but alone. He drank to drown his sorrows, to forget the pain of finally finding someone who actually loved him, only to have her taken away too soon. The pain of being alone, always alone, no matter how many people were around him.

The foster home he lived in clearly took him on for the money that the state provided for his care. They had four of their own kids and

treated Butch like a dog, but they never seemed to notice the missing liquor so he didn't really care. Butch was forced to sleep in the chilly basement on a cot next to the dusty unused weight bench and Bowflex machine. In his long lonely hours, he started to fool around with the weights to kill time. He checked out books on weightlifting from the library at school and tried to follow the little diagrams. Lifting heavier and heavier weights was the only thing that felt worthwhile in his miserable life and as his body grew stronger and larger, the bullies who had teased him suddenly began to leave him alone.

At sixteen he was five feet eight inches and one hundred sixty-five pounds. His acne started to clear up and his face grew leaner, hard in the angles of cheek and jaw. He never had to show his fake ID to buy booze anymore. He looked far older than his years, especially in the eyes. He sometimes stared at himself in the mirror of the tiny basement bathroom and swore he did not recognize his reflection. He looked like someone you didn't want to mess with, but inside, he still felt ten years old, lost and abandoned and waiting for someone who was never coming back.

He had no idea what would have become of him if he had not met Abaven "Ace" Asadoorian. It was Ace in the other photo Butch kept in his cell, though looking at it was still terribly painful for him and he could only bear to do so every few weeks. In the photo, Ace had nineteen year-old Butch in a huge bear hug, lifting him up off his feet against a chain-link background. Butch was drenched with sweat and had a huge, delirious smile on his ecstatic face. That photo had been taken seconds after he knocked out Troy Amerland: Butch's first victory. Ace was beaming at the camera like a proud father.

The first time Butch ever saw Ace was in jail. That was not the beginning of the story of how he met Ace, the first time he saw the cocky Armenian who rapidly became one of the most important people in Butch's life. It started, appropriately, with a fight. Butch's first.

There was some kind of martial arts school down the block from Butch's foster home. Butch had the idea that all martial artists were Asian, like in the kung fu movies, but these guys were mostly

Armenian and American. Butch sometimes saw them through the windows, and they weren't throwing kung fu chops and flying kicks either, they were grappling around on big blue mats in a way that looked almost like some kind of sex with clothes on. Still, he never really thought much of it until one of the students started fucking with him.

He sometimes saw little knots of students in white pants and T-shirts with the school logo, standing around outside the school, smoking or rough housing back and forth. One of the bigger guys, a darkly handsome kid about Butch's age with a slick haircut and a smile that probably got him tons of girls, always seemed to have it out for Butch. It was getting well into summer and was hot as a wrestler's armpit in the neighborhood. Butch started wearing tank tops, sometimes going bare-chested with his sweaty shirt shoved thoughtlessly into the back pocket of his jeans. This guy would eye Butch's thick arms and shoulders and flash a challenging glare. At first, Butch mostly ignored the glares, but soon the guy started throwing out comments about Butch's Mohawk, about his cheap sneakers and asking him if he thought he was tough. Butch didn't think he was tough and didn't want anything to do with the guy, who could probably kick his ass anyway, so he kept his head down as he passed and tried to shut it out. Finally, one day the guy stepped forward and blocked Butch's path.

"Where you going, taxi driver?" the guy asked.

Butch said nothing, tried to walk around him.

"Hey," the guy said, shoving Butch back hard so that he dropped his library books. "I'm talking to you, tough guy."

Butch's heart was hammering in his chest, hot blood surging in his cheeks. He clenched his jaw.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" he asked.

The guy took a swing at Butch and without stopping to think, Butch slipped aside and let the guy have it. It was as if his body was acting alone, totally without the consent of his brain. His fists flew, almost too fast to see. He didn't even feel the pain of his knuckles connecting again and again with the hard angles of the guy's skull beneath the splitting skin. The guy leaned in and tried to grab him

and Butch instinctively kneed him in the face. The guy sprawled backward and Butch grabbed him by his thick, stiffly gelled hair. He slammed his head into the bumper of a parked car again and again. All around them, the other students were howling and cheering and calling out, but Butch barely heard them.

The guy was gushing blood from a gaping cut above his right eyebrow and tried to lock his fingers around Butch's wrist but Butch kicked him back and away. When the guy stood for another wide, desperate swing, Butch ducked and hit him again, hard in the jaw. The guy stumbled back a step, tried to raise his loose fists up to his face and then fell, first to one knee and then down on his side on the concrete. His eyes rolled up in his head and he made a low nasal, almost comical sound, like snoring.

For a second, Butch felt a sense of stunned disbelief. A dizzy elation washed over him as the other students backed away from him as if he had a gun. Then there were sirens, cops and Butch was bent over the hood of a car, cuffs on his wrists and a rough hand on the back of his head as he was pushed into the back of a police car.

When the cops placed Butch in a holding cell, he saw that the guy he'd knocked out had been arrested too. He was slouched in a corner of the cell next to Butch, a hand over his eyes.

Butch saw an older Armenian man at the sergeant's desk, talking and laughing with the cop like they were old pals from way back. The Armenian man was tall and powerfully built with a receding hairline and a mischievous twinkle in his dark eyes, like one of those demented car salesmen on TV riding an elephant and screaming about their low, low prices. He wore a T-shirt with the school logo and awful, shiny green track pants with an orange stripe down each leg.

"Sinanian," the guard called. "Zaven Sinanian?"

"Yes."

"You're out," the guard said.

Butch watched the guard walk the guy he'd fought down to the desk. The older man reached out and smacked the guy on the back of the head and began cursing him in Armenian as he hustled the beaten student out the door.

Butch hung his head. He had used his one phone call to leave a message on the machine at his foster home, but he honestly didn't think anyone was coming for him. The high of victory had worn off long ago. He figured he would probably get sent to some sort of work camp or something. He sat down on the rough bench, contemplating his less than rosy future when the same guard called his name.

"Mahan!"

Butch leapt to his feet. "Yeah?"

The guard came down the row and unlocked the door to Butch's cell.

"You're free to go, kid," the guard said.

"Huh?" Butch frowned. "I'm free?"

"You got lucky, kid," the guard said. "Looks like Ace posted your bail too."

As the desk sergeant signed Butch out and gave him back his wallet, keys, and belt, he also handed Butch a business card. It had an ace of spades and the logo of the martial arts school next to the name Ace Asadoorian. Beneath that was a list of seeming nonsense words: Hayastan Jujitsu, Sambo, Mau Thai, Judo.

On the back was a barely legible scrawl that read: "Come to the school. We need to talk."

Curious, Butch went over to the martial arts school the next day. The guy he'd knocked out was there, grappling with another student, but he would not meet Butch's eyes. The older man, Ace, presumably, saw Butch and came over and gripped Butch's hand hard enough to pop the bones, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Butch, buddy," Ace said. "I'm so glad you came. Please, step into my office."

He led Butch into a small room filled with trophies and photos of Ace with famous fighters.

"Butch," Ace said again, sitting down behind a cheap metal desk. "My friend. Sergeant Haley tells me you are only sixteen. Is this true?"

"I'll be seventeen in October," Butch said.

"Sixteen," Ace shook his head. "Butch, you are amazing to me. You are a natural fighter like I have never seen. You know Zaven, that

fucking aboush that you laid out on the concrete? He is my best student. Please, tell me where you learned to fight."

Butch shrugged. "I don't know how to fight," he said. "I got mad."

Ace looked at Butch and burst out laughing. At first Butch thought he was laughing at him but then the older man stood and slapped Butch's shoulder again.

"He got mad," Ace said. "I don't believe this guy."

He pulled Butch into an embrace and to his surprise he kissed the top of his head and then squeezed his cheeks between his big hands.

"Butch," he said. "I want you to come study with me here at the school."

"Thanks," Butch said. "But I don't have any money for classes."

"Money?" Ace shook his head. "Who needs money? You help me out around the school, do some little jobs for me and I teach you. Okay?"

Butch smiled.

"I have one requirement," Ace said.

"What?"

"Get yourself a normal haircut, okay?" Ace mock-punched Butch in the shoulder. That shoulder was really starting to hurt. "If you are going to represent my school in the AAFC, I don't want you looking like some freak off the street."

The AAFC? Butch was stunned. The All American Fighting Championship was a big league mixed martial arts promotion that seemed to be getting more and more popular every day. Those guys in the AAFC were millionaires. They got thousands of dollars a fight, dated models and got to be on TV. They were like beings from another planet, gifted with special and arcane skills that no mortal man could ever hope to master.

"Well, okay," he said, unable to comprehend how profoundly his life was about to change.

That's how he started training with Ace

. Butch learned frighteningly fast, and with this newfound passion for grappling filling every waking moment of his life, he stopped drinking all together. Ace had been a terrible drunk in his younger years and was sober and reformed, so he did not approve of drinking.

Butch was so desperate for the older man's approval that he would have gladly cut off one of his arms to please Ace. Butch still craved that warm bourbon oblivion, but he pushed the desire down inside himself and buried it in training.

He had made a promise to Ace. He intended to keep it. He was working out every day, spending every day in the dojo, training harder and harder, pushing himself farther and faster. At night, Ace dragged him back to the Asadoorian home, a large, gaudy and cheerful house where his tiny wife, Sirvat, and four gorgeous daughters Miriam, Nairi, Ana and Lucy all doted over Butch and made him feel at home for the first time since Grandma Patti's death. If he had not been working out so hard, he would have become a fat pig from all the delicious food: rich, buttery boreg and roasted lamb, spicy homemade soujouk and way too much fresh baked baklava. He went to bed every night sore and exhausted, but happy.

Ace also got Butch finally and properly laid by a stunning, bleach-blonde Armenian singer named Tamara, whom Ace had insisted would "take care" of Butch. She did, and then some. Butch tried hard not to develop a crush on her, but he did anyway, even after Ace explained that if Butch wanted to see her again, he would have to start saving his hard earned pennies. Butch harbored ridiculous romantic fantasies of saving up enough money to spend another night with Tamara, during which she would fall madly in love with him and he would sweep her off her feet and take her away from all of this.

Eventually he did save enough money to see her again, but needless to say, she did not fall madly in love with him. She was far too gracious and professional to really crush him. She was gentle and sweet about it, but she made no bones about the fact that whatever happened between them was nothing more than a job to her. She said he was young, handsome and a great fighter. She promised him that he would have so many women that he would not even remember her name. He took it as well as he could, but he was sick of loving women who left him, so he deliberately closed himself off inside, vowing never to allow it to happen again.

There were other girls, ones that hung around the school and liked to sleep with young fighters, but Butch always kept them at arm's length. His emotional distance had the weird, opposite effect of making women, who would not give him the time of day when he was so desperate for love, fall all over themselves to be with him. He took what they had to offer, but never let them get under his skin. He had his training to think about.

Less than six months later, Miriam went away to college and Ace asked Butch if he wanted to stay in her empty room, to finally get out of his foster home. He took almost nothing when he left that place. No one was home to say goodbye or even good riddance. He spent the next year living in that frilly, girly room, often coming home from the dojo so exhausted and spent that he was barely able to pull down the flowery pink bedspread before falling into a dead sleep. Still, Ace pushed him harder and harder every day.

"Your opponent is not going to give you a break," Ace would say, tossing Butch down on his face on the mat for the thirtieth time in a row. "Why should I? You want a break, go to fucking McDonalds, okay? Again."

The night he found out about his first fight was one he would never forget. He had turned nineteen. He and the whole Asadoorian clan were sitting around the dinner table, laughing, joking and teasing Nairi's new boyfriend who was meeting the family for the first time. It was the usual noisy, happy chaos when the phone rang. Sirvat answered and then passed the phone to her husband. Butch saw Ace's face go from open and smiling to deadly serious, eyes meeting Butch and then going wide.

"Yes, I understand," Ace said. "He is ready. I'm sure of it."

Butch knew that he had his first pro fight before Ace hung up the phone, but when he heard the details, his guts went cold and his chest felt tight around his panicked heart.

He would be fighting Troy Amerland in six days.

Troy Amerland was a skilled veteran with a record of twenty-five and six, a solid jujitsu background and an iron chin. He had fought in various promotions for five years and had a huge fan base, especially in Pittsburgh, his hometown, where the fight would be taking place.

He had been scheduled to fight Sato Fumitaka, but the Japanese fighter had broken his leg, not in the ring, but in a motorcycle accident. They needed someone to fill in for Hardcore Cage Fighting Challenge's big Steel City Showdown. In six days. Six days.

Butch refused to go in like a lamb to the slaughter, so he and Ace spent the six days reviewing every match Amerland had ever fought, wins and losses, scrutinizing and picking apart every move and searching for weaknesses. Butch trained and trained, then trained some more, refining his technique and trying not to let the creeping panic win. While he was sweating and pushing his aching body in the dojo, he was able to keep it back, but at night, he lay awake in Miriam's old bed, drenched in cold sweat and doubt. He did not want to get hurt and look like a fool in front of the cameras, but more than that, he did not want to let Ace down. He couldn't possibly win, but he could try to go the distance, to lose by decision rather than getting knocked out.

The Steel City Arena was small, but packed to the rafters. The roar of the crowd was deafening. Amerland stood in the opposite corner of the cage, throwing Butch occasional smirks of haughty contempt. He was a pale blond, older and thicker than Butch, but their builds were similar. Amerland had the rough, uneven fighter's profile and cauliflower ears that Butch would not develop for several years yet. Butch's nose was still unbroken, skin young and unscarred by anything but acne, ears thin and smooth, but they could have been brothers. Butch had watched hours and hours of video footage of Amerland, but it wasn't until he saw the older fighter in person that he noticed the resemblance.

Ace stood in Butch's corner, slapping Butch's shoulder and popping the clear plastic mouthguard between Butch's teeth.

"You're sub defense is excellent and so is your stamina," Ace told him. "But if you are not careful, you can blow out everything you've got on offense in the first few minutes. Take your time, feel what he's got. And remember," Ace pointed to Amerland on the other side of the ring, "that man is not your enemy. Hate is a waste of energy. You go in there and you use your skills to win, like any other sport. Go on, make me proud."

Ace left him, and Butch stepped up to the center of the ring, face to face with the cocky Amerland. The ref told them there could be no biting, eye gouging, fish hooking, groin strikes and blows to the back of the head. Butch felt the sound of the buzzer jolt through his bones like an electric shock and he bounced back and started circling, hands up and wary and trying not to show the ragged edges of nervous fear beneath his stony, fixed expression. As he and Amerland circled, the older man suddenly blasted Butch with a stiff kick to the thigh. Butch ate the pain and gave nothing back, not even flinching as a gaudy purple welt rose up on the exposed skin below the hem of his trunks. He felt a flush of hot rage blossom from the pain, but he forced it down too. He needed to stay cool. Stay cool and make Ace proud.

Amerland kicked him again, this time on the inside of his right thigh. The pain was brutal but he still did not flinch. Amerland threw another kick and quickly followed up with two swift punches. Butch bounced back out of range and shook himself out, forcing himself to breathe deep and slow.

They went back to the cautious circling for a few seconds more, then Amerland threw an ambitious high kick to the head. Butch bounced back out of range again, and Amerland overshot, back turned and open to Butch. Butch backed off, anxious and unsure. He could see Ace's mouth moving, screaming at him from the other side of the chain link, but Butch could not make out his words. The sound of the crowd had melted into a kind of mindless white noise, shouts and jeers seemingly unable to compete with the thunder of his anxious heart. Amerland threw another inside kick and Butch dodged away. Again Amerland's exposed his broad back. Butch still did not move in with an offensive attack.

Amerland was saying something fiercely sarcastic, but Butch felt as if his ears were stuffed with cotton. Amerland shook his head and then shot in and down, reaching for Butch's legs.

Butch threw his legs back, landing on his belly on top of Amerland, but he got immediately back up again, falling back into his cautious circling. Now he could see that Amerland was getting really frustrated. Butch knew he couldn't circle forever, but his mind was

blank. He was sure that he had forgotten everything he knew, that he was making a terrible mistake.

He turned to Ace again, who was holding up one finger. He could read Ace's lips shouting: "One minute!"

Only one minute left in this first round. He had to try something, but before he could come up with anything clever, Amerland threw a sharp left jab, following up with a right hook. He missed but as the hook passed a cool millimeter from Butch's nose, Amerland suddenly grabbed the back of Butch's head and thrust his powerful knee upward.

Butch looked down at the knee, watching it rise, almost like it was coming at him in slow motion. All the anxious stuttering clamor of his brain shut off as if with a switch. His hands were moving like their own separate creatures, locking beneath Amerland's knee and lifting the older fighter. Butch raised his head up hard, breaking Amerland's hold and lifting him off his feet. In a burst of power he threw Amerland as hard as he could, tossing the older fighter over his shoulder in a kind of desperate, psuedo-suplex. The crowd was shrieking and howling and going completely insane. Butch fell back with Amerland. When they hit the mat, Butch could feel the older fighter going for an arm bar, but Amerland was stunned and his grip was weak. Amerland's experience made his body keep fighting in spite of the powerful slam he had taken, but he was weary and slow, and Butch could feel it. He stood, lifting the guy up as he clung like a monkey to Butch's arm. Lifting him even higher into the air, Butch brought Amerland down hard, breaking the lock. Without a second's hesitation, Butch came down with a wicked left that hit his downed opponent right on the buzzer. For a crazy fraction of a second, Butch thought that the sound of the buzzer had actually come from his fist connecting with Amerland's face.

Then the ref was beside him, sending them back to their corners and Ace was there, slapping Butch's shoulder again.

"You need to pick your shot now, Butch," Ace said, taking Butch's mouth piece out and squirting water between Butch's lips. "Pick your shot. He's gonna be dazed in the next round so you need to let loose

with those machine gun fists." Ace put the mouthpiece back in. "Stun him with a left and then give him the machine gun hands, okay?"

Butch nodded, then Ace was gone and the buzzer sounded. Butch came out aggressive, anxiety banished, replaced by cold, pure focus. He landed a quick jab and followed up with a crushing right that drove Amerland back against the cage. Amerland came back off the chain link right away, roaring in for a takedown, but Butch drove his knee into Amerland's nose.

He felt the hot splatter of blood as the juicy crunch of Amerland's nose breaking resonated through his leg. Amerland's head rocked back and the momentum lifted him up straight. Butch finally heard Ace's voice, drifting into his consciousness like a voice from another country tuned in on a distant radio.

"Machine gun!" Ace yelled.

Butch let fly with both hands, landing a solid dozen blows in just over a second, following the older fighter down to the mat. Then the ref jumped in, hand on Butch's chest, pushed him back and waved his other arm to stop the fight. It was over. Amerland was out cold. The crowd was out of their seats, screaming at the tops of their lungs. Ace was there, arms around Butch in a huge bear hug as cameras flashed all around them.

After the fight, a bulky, stern-faced man with glasses came over to Butch and shook his hand. It wasn't until later that night that he learned that man was Tony Candor, owner of the AAFC. He was the one who gave Butch the nickname "the Butcher".

He debuted in the AAFC with a bullet. Candor had set up a rematch with Amerland, and though the older man came out aggressive and ready, Butch knocked him out again in the first round. Butch was on top of the world, unstoppable. All the toughest guys in the promotion were chomping at the bit to get in the cage with Butch, and he set them up and knocked them down one after the other. In five years he was eighteen and one. It was only a matter of time before he went for the belt.

The night he won the light heavyweight championship title, and the subsequent nightmare that would completely destroy his life, still haunted him. He had examined every minute with obsessive

intensity but he still could not figure out what the hell had gone wrong or how he could possibly have done something so inhumane.

He met the two women in the casino. They said their names were Sugar and Cheyenne, but he found out during the trial that their real names were Susan Ralling and Denise Hubert. Sugar was a cute, feisty little bombshell, bleach-blonde, saucy with a dynamite body. Cheyenne was a tall, leggy showgirl with natural red hair and a hint of freckles. They were aggressive, hell bent on being the buns to his beef. They probably would have got started right on the casino floor if he hadn't let them drag him up to the preposterous luxury suite the hotel had provided for him as the winner of the title fight. He saw no reason to stop them. He was high on his victory, his first championship belt, and he felt sure nothing bad could ever happen on a night like that. Ace had winked at Butch when he saw the two girls, giving him the thumbs up and Butch smiled, each arm around a soft, narrow waist.

The girls wanted champagne and when he told them he didn't drink, Sugar ran out to the soda machine to buy him a ginger ale, so he would have something to toast with. The ginger ale was an odd brand he'd never had before and he had never really drunk sweet sodas anyway, but he drank it to be polite. It was kind of hard to pay attention to the funny aftertaste when Sugar was showing off the fact that her friend was really a natural red head, and Cheyenne had her long-nailed hand inside his fly. That's when everything went strange and strobe-like, jittery and disconnected. It was like some kind of awful acid trip and whenever he tried to focus back and remember what had happened, the dizzy, non sequential memories seemed to squirm away from his attention like bugs under a lifted rock. He could only recall disjointed, nightmarish scraps of blood and panic and wet, awful sounds and a smell like meat and urine.

No fingerprints were found besides his and those of the two girls. There was no sign of a break-in and no one saw any suspicious activity on that floor. Butch told his lawyer that the girls must have drugged him against his will somehow, put something in his drink when he wasn't looking. However, the police never found any soda can and the brand of ginger ale he described was not for sale in the

soda machine in the hotel. When he demanded a blood test, the test came back positive for an exotic, but relatively mild drug similar to Ecstasy. Tests on the corpses of the two girls revealed the same. Just a groovy fun time orgy that went horribly wrong. Ace had been there at his side every minute up until that point, but when those test results came in, the look on Ace's face almost killed Butch. The anger, the shame and, worst of all, the disappointment. Ace said nothing. He spat on the floor between Butch's feet and walked away. He might as well have cut Butch's heart out. The pain of watching Ace walk away, of knowing that Ace thought he really had killed those girls, made Butch want to die.

As the trial dragged on and on, Butch started to think that he must have done what they said. After all, he didn't really remember anything and the soul-crushing guilt that was eating him from the inside out felt like proof enough that he deserved the death penalty. He got it, by unanimous decision.

The first few months seemed like years. He would sit, silent and wracked with guilt, staring down at the photo of him and Ace and wanting a drink so bad he thought his aching head would explode. He almost wished it would. At least then it would stop hurting, stop torturing him with what could have been.

When he first got the call to audition for *Xtreme Elimination*, he had no intention of doing it. He didn't want to downgrade his sentence. He wanted to get it over with. But they were persistent, sending him request after request. The thing that finally made his mind up for him was a phone call from a producer named Caleb Carson. This Carson guy said that if Butch won, in addition to the prize" of not being put to death, Butch would get a team of the best and most ruthless lawyers to prove that Butch hadn't killed those girls after all, that he had been drugged against his will and that someone else had come in while he was in a narcotic stupor. In fact, this Carson guy said, he already had his people "looking into it". They had some "interesting leads" and Carson felt sure that they could at least get him a retrial.

The tiny smidgen of hope that maybe he wasn't a murderer, that he had been set up somehow, and more importantly, that he could find

a way to prove to Ace that he was innocent, flared up bright and blinding and he agreed to be on the show.

Now, sitting in his cell, waiting for someone to come and tell him it was time to go, he was filled with dread and apprehension. Would he be able to kill someone else to prove he hadn't killed those girls? Not someone, but eleven someones, more than half of whom would be women?

Butch picked up the photo of him and Ace, and turned it over in his hands.

He didn't have a choice.

FOUR

Dina had drawn the short straw in the latest round of "who's gonna baby-sit Jason", so while Kenworth, Sanders, Levin and Polk were up on deck getting suntans and playing cards, Dina and RJ Beck were stuck in the stuffy, dank hold, chilling with Mr Personality. Having been down there for nearly twenty minutes, Dina had come to the conclusion that she would much rather hang out alone with Jason for the rest of the trip than spend another thirty seconds enduring RJ's ham handed pick-up lines and extravagant stories of his own daring and manly adventures.

RJ was too handsome for his own good and clearly had it way too easy with women. He had an almost girlishly pretty face, an underwear model body and apparently figured that this made him exempt from such mundane concepts as manners, respect or even tact. Dina thought from the beginning that he was way too soft for this kind of work, but Kenworth swore he was solid. He was great for confidence scams and manipulation of individuals surrounding a given target, but most people were far more impressed by looks than Dina. She put up with him on the team because she had to, but his endless come-ons were really starting to wear thin.

The worst part about it all was that RJ was supposedly one of Brian's best friends. It wasn't like Dina and Brian really were an item; they had been on a few dates. Brian agreed to help bait Jason since Dina, the only female, didn't feel comfortable making out with anyone else on the team, but there really wasn't anything solid between them. In fact, it had been awkward when Dina left him waiting for the ambulance in order to complete the rest of the mission. She had squeezed his hand, wanting to say something comforting, something that a girlfriend would say, anything, but nothing came to mind. She tried to remember how good it felt to kiss him, but she felt shell-shocked and numb.

"I'll see you later," she said instead.

He nodded, trying not to let her see how much pain he was in. He held her hand for a moment longer, then let it go and Dina left. Dina

still didn't know how to feel about it.

But she did know that she did not have any interest whatsoever in getting it on with Brian's sleazy pal while Brian was recovering or dying in hospital. She gave RJ nothing but ice, but he did not seem at all discouraged. She concentrated on blocking out his voice and entertained herself by imagining pushing him over the railing or cutting off his head and blaming Jason.

Meanwhile, Jason was still encased in the restraining foam with only his head free of the heavy, hardened goo. He had been placed between two layers of crisscrossed steel rebar and the two layers were bolted together, trapping him like a piece of bread in an old-fashioned toaster. The whole contraption was then chained upright to eye hooks in the bulkhead. It wasn't pretty, but it seemed to work, so long as the foam held and they kept Jason knocked out till it was time for his big prime time debut.

Dina kept thinking that she would get used to the big, undead lug, that having spent the last twelve hours in close quarters with him would have inured her to his presence, but he still disturbed her profoundly. There was something so unnatural, so utterly wrong about him. Dina had dealt with a lot of bad men in the course of her checkered career as a professional gun for hire, but in the end, they were all men. This Jason, he was... Well, something else.

Every now and then, that single good eye would skitter around beneath the wrinkled gray lid, almost as if he was dreaming in his tranquilized stupor. Dina couldn't even imagine what could be going on inside that malformed head.

"So," RJ said to Dina. "What are your plans after we drop off Mr Voorhees? Gonna take a little R and R?"

"I'm gonna go visit Brian in the hospital," Dina said. "If he's still alive."

"Oh, yeah, sure," RJ said, a sudden wide-eyed look of fake sincerity on his face. "We should do that."

Dina kept her breathing slow and even, refusing to allow him to get a rise out of her.

"I know," RJ said, fishing a tiny digital camera the size of credit card from his pocket. "Take my picture with Jason! Brian will love

it."

Dina rolled her eyes. "No. That's a really stupid idea."

"Why not?" RJ walked over to Jason and rapped on the blank white mask with his knuckles. "He won't mind."

"The lighting in here sucks," Dina replied, a cold flush of uneasy fear filling her belly.

"It's got a flash," RJ said, tossing the little camera to Dina. "Come on, it'll be great."

Dina shrugged and raised the camera, framing RJ and the bound Jason in the tiny view screen.

RJ leaned in close and puckered up his lips as if ready to kiss Jason on the cheek. Dina snapped a photo.

"One more, one more!" RJ said, reaching through the rebar to put his arm around Jason's lumpy, foam encased shoulders and flashing a big cheesy smile.

"Enough already," Dina said.

"Just one more," RJ said.

"Fine," Dina said. "Scream."

RJ opened his mouth wide in a goofy parody of a scream. Dina sighed and pushed the button to snap another picture.

Three things happened at once. The flash went off, filling the claustrophobic space with white light. There was a loud, reverberating *crack* as the hardened foam surrounding Jason's right arm split off from the main bulk of his immobilized body. RJ screamed for real as Jason's foam-encrusted mitt reached between the rebar, grabbed RJ by his trendy, bed-head hair and started pulling him inexorably toward the raw end of a cut piece of rebar.

Dina dropped the camera and ran forward to grab Jason's hand and try to pull his fingers free of RJ's hair. They were as unbendable as the rebar.

"Get him off me, man!" RJ hollered. "Fuck, get him off me!"

"Hold still," Dina commanded, pulling a small survival knife from her back pocket and thumbing it open.

Dina began sawing though RJ's hair. Jason had such a tight grip that she had to cut the hair down to the skin beneath his huge gray fist.

"Ow, fuck!" RJ said as Dina's knife nicked his scalp. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I fucking told you to hold still," Dina spat. "You want me to save your stupid ass or not?"

The jagged piece of rebar got closer and closer to RJ's forehead and he crossed his eyes trying to see it.

"Fine," RJ said, squeezing his eyes shut. "Hurry up, okay?"

Kenworth and Polk, alerted by the scream, came barreling in the door. Kenworth held the foam sprayer and Polk, a Glock 21. They both wore terribly serious expressions that cracked into smirks when they saw what was going on.

"Almost there," Dina said, cutting through the last strands of hair.

"Come on, come on, come on!" RJ said.

Finally, RJ was free and he and Dina tumbled together down and out of the way, leaving Jason with a fistful of hair and expensive pomade. Kenworth stepped in and hit Jason with another layer of the foam, trapping his free arm back against the rebar.

RJ stood, rubbing the back of his head. He looked like he had been forcibly abducted by monks and jumped into their order. There was a large, mostly bald and bleeding patch at the crown of his head and his face was bright, blotchy red.

"Smooth move, Friar Tuck," Polk said, holstering the Glock and shaking his head.

"It's a good look for you," Kenworth agreed.

"Fuck off, man!" RJ replied.

Dina bent to retrieve the little camera. She fooled around with the buttons until she figured out which one showed photos already taken. The look on RJ's face when Jason grabbed him was priceless.

"I think I need an eight by ten of this one," Dina said.

"Give me that," RJ said, reaching for the camera.

Dina handed the camera to Kenworth. He snickered and passed it to Polk.

"You're right," Dina said to RJ. "Brian is definitely gonna love this photo."

Kenworth fired another tranquilizer dart into the immobilized Jason's neck, below his ear. The masked head rolled and tossed

furiously for a few seconds, then slowed and slumped forward.

"All right, you two," Kenworth said. "I think that's enough excitement for now. Beck?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Go change your pants.

Everyone laughed, but Dina's eyes kept going back to that cryptic, emotionless white mask. It was going to be a long trip.

FIVE

Dr Helen Cain stood before the doorway to her benefactor's private office, shifting her grip on the slick plastic folder that held her latest report. She was tall and distressingly beautiful with a lush, curvy body beneath her sterile white lab coat. She looked as if she was about to take off her glasses, pull the pins from her thick chestnut hair and start stripping on the table like some rock and roll video vixen, but if you gazed into her cold, clinical gray eyes, you knew that she never would. She refused to do the MENSA in lace routine. Her beauty meant nothing to her and the reactions of men around her were far less interesting than the asexual division of bacteria in a Petri dish.

Dr Cain had grown up surrounded by science, and more specifically, by microscopic killers. Her father, Louis Cain, was a legendary research microbiologist who had been at the forefront of several critical discoveries regarding the role of the enzyme reverse transcriptase in RNA viruses. Her mother, Georgia, was a professor of biochemistry whose classes were some of the most competitive and sought after in the country. They had waited until their late forties to have their only daughter, and were always intellectually supportive, but emotionally distant. Helen inherited both their reserved, chilly demeanor and their lifelong fascination with those tiny, barely living packets of protein-coated nucleic acid more commonly known as viruses.

She also inherited their obsession with cleanliness. Both her parents were staunch atheists and cared nothing for "godliness", but cleanliness, on the other hand, was critical in their line of research. That awareness of the ever-present microscopic villains clinging to every unwashed surface carried over into their home life as well. Helen understood this too and took their dire warnings about unthinking contact with less than hygienically meticulous individuals to heart at an early age.

Unfortunately, both her parents died less than six months before Helen graduated valedictorian from the Eberly College of Science at

Penn State, so they never had a chance to see their daughter follow in their footsteps. After all their years handling some of the most deadly viruses on earth, it was something much larger and far more mundane that did them in: a speeding SUV. Their Volvo was hit head on by a drunken teenager and both of them were killed instantly. It was tragic and shocking, but the ever-practical Helen felt it was not really a bad way for them to go. Her mother in particular had a horror of hospitals. Both her parents belonged to the Hemlock Society and were outspoken advocates of euthanasia. They had explained to Helen shortly after her eighteenth birthday that they both planned to commit suicide rather than ever allow themselves to be debilitated by disease. In the end, they didn't need the pills and plastic bag. In a way, Helen supposed, they got lucky. They were on their way home from one of her mother's successful and prestigious lectures. They had stopped for ice cream in an uncharacteristically whimsical moment of indulgence when the accident took place. Helen imagined that they had both been content and satisfied at the moment of their deaths. Still, Helen was not able to shake this notion that even "good" death could be somehow avoided. There had to be a way and Helen was determined to find it before her own date with a SUV.

After the funerals, the sale of the modest family house and supervision of the donation of various papers, books and other research materials to the library at Georgia's old Alma Mater, Helen went on to graduate school, working steadily toward a PhD in Immunology and Infectious Diseases from SUNY, Albany.

Her fellow students did not care for Helen, but their scorn and whispering gossip meant nothing to her. She was thought of as a snob, an obsessive-compulsive spinster-in-training with no interest in campus social life. There were rumors that she was really a lesbian, but the truth was much more simple. She had absolutely no interest in multi cellular life forms of any kind.

Helen had never had any sort of sex that she was aware of. While her fellow students seemed interested in little else, she could not bother to take the time away from her research. She had imagined that students of microbiology would be more aware of the teeming

bacterial and viral fauna lurking in each other's orifices, and therefore, like her, strive to avoid becoming disease vectors through that kind of interpersonal contact.

She also did not understand the concept of leisure time. Any of Helen's time that was not taken up with required studies was spent on other, more interesting personal research. She had no interest in movies, books or music. She had no hobbies. She was interested in viruses. Nothing else. While most of the faculty did not care for the odd, chilly and intense Helen, they had to grudgingly admit that she was genuinely brilliant. She passed every class with flawless grades and graduated at the top of her class.

Immediately after graduation from SUNY, Helen scored a plum post doc placement at the National Center for Infectious Diseases in DC. Young Helen was thrilled by the unlimited access to the best equipment and most exotic and dangerous viruses. It was a dream come true, everything she ever wanted. However, that honeymoon was short lived. She was let go only three months in for "unethical" activities.

Helen never understood why the exploration of scientific concepts that were so logical and obvious could ever be deemed unethical. Ethics were for the weak. Haphazard and preposterous distinctions arbitrarily set up thousands of years ago by superstitious cavemen. As long as the scientific community allowed itself to be unfairly shackled by religious hysteria and outmoded concepts of "right" and "wrong", there could be no real progress.

When eccentric millionaire Thomas Dart approached her, she was hugely relieved to find someone who shared her views. He was an odd, quirky, modern version of J Harvey Kellogg, obsessed with health, vitality and most importantly, prolonging human life.

The Dart Ranch was a multimillion-dollar Malibu spa retreat for celebs to come eat grass clippings and get high colonic enemas for five thousand dollars a day. Helen hated the place and the vapid Hollywood royalty that came there to do penance for their over-indulgent ways. But she knew which side of her bread was buttered and so she endured Dart and his macrobiotic acolytes. On the Dart Ranch, she had a large, state-of-the-art lab and more cutting edge

equipment than the NCID. She had a never-ending supply of animal models, including expensive primates, and no annoying ethical restrictions. Her research was making slow but steady progress. She felt inches from a major breakthrough and couldn't wait to get her hands on more human subjects.

Her dream, her obsession, the thing that fascinated and compelled her ever since her parents' death, was the prospect of engineering a hybrid virus that would indefinitely prolong the life of its host organism. After all, what was a virus's desire? What did it strive for above all else? To survive and to replicate. A virus that allowed its host to live forever would be itself immortal, replicating endlessly without ever having to take that scary, uncertain air or blood borne leap in search of a new host.

She had been working mostly with various strains of herpes, a virus that was known to be a lifer in the human body. It had a clever way of burying itself deeply and irrevocably into the cortex of the human brain. She had some limited success in lower animal models, increasing the lives of mice to nearly twice their normal span. But even with Dart's money and influence, human models were hard to come by. As of yet, she'd had no success whatsoever with the few she had. There had been several ugly and traumatic deaths. Dart's minions obediently buried her sterilized failures under the organic vegetable garden. The celebrity guests were all so impressed by the big, healthy squash and tomatoes that thrived so beautifully at Dart Ranch,

Dart had summoned Dr Cain to his inner sanctum with the promise of something revolutionary; something that would take their research to the next level. Dr Cain was skeptical. She always felt that Dart was erratic and shamefully unscientific in his sudden, whimsical theories, but she knew it was in her best interest to listen to what he had to say with an oh-so-interested face so that she could get back to doing things her way as quickly as possible. Besides, who knew? Maybe the old nutbar really had stumbled across something worthwhile.

Dart's private rooms were million dollar handcrafted replicas of primitive jungle huts, all bamboo and palm fronds and rough bark

and woven hemp. Dr Cain found it hilarious that all of the "natural" materials required to construct this absurd "ecofriendly" sanctuary cost a thousand times more than the mundane modern dwellings of the Los Angeles peasantry. Plus all those rough, porous and uneven surfaces were impossible to keep truly clean. The singing of endangered rain forest frogs was piped in over the hypnotic patter of dripping water and rustle of windswept leaves: nature's elevator music.

Dart himself was in his late sixties, though he looked to be a hale and hardy forty. Blond, tan, smooth-cheeked and possessing a rugged, athletic build, Dart sat behind a sprawling desk that looked for all the world like something rejected from the set of *Gilligan's Island* for being too unrealistic. He wore loose, rough hemp clothing that could have passed for prison pajamas made by the blind. On his large tan feet were uncomfortable-looking Chinese woven grass monk's sandals. He was sipping some horrendous, lumpy, khaki-colored slop from a large unwieldy wooden cup. The thought of all the happy bacteria vigorously reproducing in the cracks and crevices of a cup like that made her shudder with revulsion. She only used disposable plastic cups, plates and utensils.

"Dr Cain," he said in his mellifluous preacher's voice. "How goes the good fight?"

"I've prepared a written summery of the most recent human trials." Dr Cain placed her slick plastic folder on his desk. It lay there incongruously like an artifact left by time travelers on the rough surface of the ridiculous desk. "I feel we are closer than ever to real, quantifiable results, but I must have more human models."

"My good woman," Dart said, seemingly oblivious to Dr Cain's obvious distaste for such patronizing language. "You will be pleased to know that I have some exciting news for you. Something that may turn out to be the key we've been searching for."

Dr Cain waited silently for him to continue. Instead, he farted loudly and robustly. Dart was forever lecturing anyone who would listen on the disastrous effects of stifling the release of intestinal gas. He believed this unfair social stigmatization of a perfectly natural bodily function to be the cause of such diverse physical ills as sexual

dysfunction, insomnia, depression and tension headaches. Dr Cain was used to his frequent noisy emissions, but she still could not help but feel he was doing it purely for shock value, like a little boy showing off his chewed up food in the school lunchroom.

Dart pushed a hidden button on his desk and one of the rattan wall screens slid back to reveal a decidedly modern and quite unnatural plasma screen television. On the screen was a garish logo that read: "XTREME ELIMINATION". For a moment, Dr Cain feared it would be a film about enemas and defecation, but then the logo faded and cut to a scene of two men fighting.

"I'm afraid I fail to see the connection," Dr Cain said, frowning as one of the half naked brutes smashed the other's head in with a fist-sized rock.

"This vulgar, violent and morally abhorrent show is entering its second season. As a 'surprise guest', the producer has captured a singular individual in whom I have maintained an intense interest for over a decade."

Dr Cain arched a dark brow. She could not imagine where this conversation was going. "Oh?"

Dart smiled, big and toothy and smug. "Have you ever heard the legend of Camp Crystal Lake?"

Dr Cain thought she remembered something about a series of brutal murders committed at an old campground somewhere in upstate New York, not far from where she had attended graduate school. The story was told in breathless whispers by her fellow students at SUNY New Paltz, retold with more lurid detail each year as if it had happened last summer. But, to Dr Cain's surprise, there actually seemed to be a grain of truth in the wild stories. As Dart detailed the apparent immortality of this legendary Jason Voorhees, Dr Cain found herself intrigued and fascinated in spite of herself. What could be causing this near deathless state? And more importantly, how could it be used, harnessed to her immortality virus and made to serve her goals? If only they could get a sample of DNA from this undead killer, Dr Cain felt sure the answer to all their questions would be within her grasp.

"Jason is currently being transported down to a small island off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica for the filming of *Xtreme Elimination*," Dart told her. "I have arranged a team to collect your DNA sample and set up a portable lab where they can splice Jason's DNA into our designer virus. Under your video-linked supervision, of course." He flashed another wide, smarmy smile and farted again, this time a whole gaseous adagio of varying pitch and intensity. "How soon can you prepare a sample of our little science project?"

Dr Cain returned his smile, something she rarely did. If you did not know her, you would never know that the tiny twitch at the corner of her full, sexy lips was meant to be a smile. Without another word, she turned on her heel and left. So much preparation to be done, so little time.

SIX

Alex Coyle stood alone in the grim, narrow strip of razor wire-bound desert, which passed itself off as an exercise yard for the condemned prisoners at the Central California Women's Facility, Chowchilla. Well, as alone as a dangerous, death row prisoner could ever really be. There were two, armed male guards in a tower above the sadistically exposed toilet in the corner of the yard, the only available bathroom during her two hours of daily outdoor exercise. If she wanted toilet paper, she had to yell up for them to tear off a wad and throw it down to her. Lord knows, she would go hog wild if she ever got her hands on the whole roll. The guards occasionally waved and flexed their biceps at her, but she did her best to ignore them.

She had become quite the local celebrity since she received the call confirming her selection for *Xtreme Elimination*. The seven other women inside the wire cage, which isolated the condemned prisoners from the rest of the population, hooted and hollered whenever the guards came to take Alex out for her extra outdoor exercise time, or when they brought her new, special meals five times a day instead of three. The other women seemed to simultaneously resent her sudden celebrity privileges and root for her like rabid sports fans cheering for the hometown team. She was not sure what to make of the star treatment either.

The deplorable and degrading conditions at CCWF had become an endless, horribly familiar nightmare from which she thought she would never wake up. The first time they brought her dinner she found two perfect, steamed chicken breasts and a cup of brown rice in place of the usual ice-cold mystery meat suffocating in a crude oil slick of vile fatty gravy. It was then she burst into tears. There was no question in her mind that she would win. She had to. She would do anything for a second chance to live a real life, her *own* life, something that she had never really done.

She hefted the high-tech plastic, water-filled barbells they had provided for her daily *Xtreme Elimination* mandated workouts. She had to let the water out of them at gun point at the end of each

session-like she was really going to try to smash an armed guard in the face while his four buddies stood by and watched—but she was so glad to have real weights again that she did not complain. Her body instantly remembered and responded to the heft and pull, the good solid ache of weight training. She was sure the guards were not thrilled about the hassle of having to fill up her weights every day, but the *Xtreme Elimination* producer was probably paying a fortune for her special treatment, so they couldn't really complain.

As she began to warm up with some light chest and triceps work, she found herself focusing down hard, struggling to concentrate only on each individual muscle as it pulled and contracted, pulled and contracted. However, she could not seem to stop her mind from wandering back over the road that had brought her to this. The naive girl who had followed her high school sweetheart to Hollywood, California with little but the clothes she stood up in would never in a million years have been excited about an opportunity to murder eleven strangers on national television. How in the world had it come to this?

When nineteen year-old Alex decided to make the move from Homer, Alaska, to Southern California, it was love that made up her mind. Daughter of a fisherman who was rarely there, and a stripper turned full-time barfly, Alex was sure her parents wouldn't even notice that she was gone. She had spent most of her long lonely childhood waiting. Waiting for daddy to come back from the Bering Strait. Waiting for momma to come back from the bars. Waiting for someone, anyone to notice her, to look at her, to really see her. To make her feel real.

When she met Jake Crow in her senior year in high school, he swept Alex off her feet. He was a guitar player and a poet, full blood Tlingit Indian and darkly handsome with long black hair he wore bound into braids. He called her "Little Wolf Eyes" and wrote songs about her. She fell in love so hard and so fast that it was like drowning. He was her first. She would have moved to Afghanistan to please him. He told the love struck Alex that she was his muse, that he did not want success if he could not share it with her. That she had to go with him to seek his fortune in Los Angeles, where he

would become a rock and roll star. He did not have to twist her arm. She took almost nothing from her parents' big ramshackle house, jumped into Jake's battered old Suburban and headed for the sun-drenched dream of Southern California.

They found a small, barely affordable apartment in Hollywood and Alex got a job in a franchise juice bar, working double shifts to make ends meet. Of course, Jake couldn't work a day job, because he needed to be spending all his time and effort working on his "connections" and trying to get gigs and meet important people. When Alex asked him why all his connections seemed to be in bars, he scoffed and shook his head at her like she was a little girl. Where did she think the real action was in the music scene? Not in stuffy offices or working a lousy day job, that was for sure. It was in the clubs. Not bars, clubs. That was the only way to keep your finger on the pulse of the rock and roll scene.

Pretty soon, he stopped calling her Little Wolf Eyes. In fact, he rarely spoke to her at all. He became nothing more than a grumpy, hungover lump that remained in the bed when she got up and went to work each morning. He was drinking so heavily at that point that she often found him passed out in the little courtyard in front of their tiny bungalow and had to drag him in, still four sheets to the wind and throwing up on her work shirt and making her late over and over again.

She was fired from the juice bar on the same day that Jake sat her down and told her he had decided that his new Hollywood rock and roll lifestyle would be much more fun without her in it. The girl driving the van that showed up to pick up his things was bleached blonde and covered with tattoos, with a ring in her lower lip and a chilly sneer. Alex cried and cried, feeling utterly lost and hopeless, stranded in an unfamiliar city with no friends and no prospects. She was even considering slinking back to Homer with her tail between her legs when her Russian landlady saw her crying on the steps and came to see what was wrong.

She gave Alex a lacy handkerchief to wipe her nose and commiserated with her about Jake.

"Men are dogs," she told Alex. "First time they smell the pussy, they are gone. I've married three times, divorced three times. Every time, the same story."

Alex tried to smile, but she felt like she had taken a shotgun blast to the heart. The landlady told Alex she needed a change of scenery. She happened to have an opening in one of her buildings in Venice, right near the beach. Alex would love it, the landlady assured her. It would give Alex a whole new perspective, and maybe even a chance to meet one of those hunky bodybuilders at Muscle Beach.

Alex had never even heard of Muscle Beach or Gold's Venice. The only Venice she knew was in Italy. When she finally arrived with her meager belongings at the tiny studio apartment on Indiana Avenue, she had been a little disappointed. The building was kind of shabby, rundown and not as close to the beach as the landlady had made it sound. But the place was hers, and hers alone. She put her things around and stood in the middle of the single room, wondering what the hell she was going to do with herself.

She got a job in a health food store and spent a lot of her free time sitting, staring out at the ocean. The sea was so much tamer, more mellow and inviting than back home. She never felt lonely looking out at that hazy blue horizon. Most of the rest of the time, however, was a different story.

Mr Yo, the owner of the health food store, was Korean and barely spoke English except for a handful of terse commands. His trendy daughter, Lisa, was two years younger than Alex and not particularly friendly. Most of Lisa's communications to Alex were catty comments about how if she "fixed herself up a little" she would get a new boyfriend.

"You've got a decent bod," she would tell Alex between slicking her mouth with flavored lip-gloss and text messaging on her tiny cellphone. "And those eyes are like, whoa. But honestly, guys would never know it. You wear loose, dumpy clothes and your hair's all in your face all the time."

Secretly, Alex wanted more than anything for Lisa to invite her shopping or give her a makeover or something, but she was too shy to ask and Lisa never offered. On long lonely nights, Alex would stay

up late watching those shows where cool people would take some loser and give them a haircut and new clothes and they would be suddenly fabulous. Alex felt sure that she would make tons of friends if she could be on a show like that.

Her life was going nowhere fast. She had been in Venice for nearly six months and still had no friends and no real plans for the future. She was starting to seriously consider moving back home again when her whole life changed forever.

A woman came into the store-blonde, tanned and hugely muscular. She wore a tank top that was stretched taut over huge round breasts and skintight shorts that hid nothing of her astonishing physique. Extremely muscular people were common in Venice and Alex normally didn't think much of it, but this woman was truly unbelievable, almost superhuman, and she exuded a cool, regal kind of grace that was impossible to look away from. She was trying different colors of cruelty-free lipstick on the back of her hand when two young men skulking around the protein powders went suddenly and completely wild, rushing over to her.

"Annika!" they called. "Annika, you're awesome."

The woman smiled indulgently and tolerated their fawning and stammering, signing autographs for them and allowing them to photograph each other flexing tiny biceps next to her massive arm.

When they finally let her go, she bought two different lipsticks and a protein drink and left. It wasn't until months later that Alex realized that woman had been bodybuilding champion Annika van der Heyden, the reigning Ms Olympia for three years running.

Lisa made a sour face as soon as she was gone. "Like lipstick is gonna do her any good."

"What do you mean?" Alex had asked.

"Come on," Lisa replied. "My dad looks more like a girl than she does. It's disgusting. They are all like that over at Gold's." Lisa shuddered dramatically. "Gross."

Gold's. She must have been talking about that huge gym down the block where all the bodybuilders went. As soon as Alex got home, she went online and checked out the Gold's Gym Website, studying the tiny photos as if they contained some hidden message for her. It took

nearly a month for her to scrape together the courage to actually go in.

She was way too shy to talk to anyone, so when the pretty blonde girl at the desk asked if she could help, Alex muttered an inarticulate negative. She walked over to pretend she was looking at the cute little matching scraps of pink and black spandex featuring the famous Gold's logo. When a man's deep voice spoke up behind her, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"So," the voice said. "Are you thinking of becoming part of our family here at Gold's?"

When she turned she saw a devastatingly handsome man with movie star blue eyes that crinkled in the corners, and a thick, flagrantly muscular build straining beneath his taut, tanned skin. He winked, flashing a warm, winning smile full of dazzlingly white, perfect teeth. It was the first time a man in Los Angeles had actually initiated a conversation with her that was not about how much something cost. She was utterly flummoxed but her paralytic shyness did not seem to matter to him one bit.

"My name's Mark," he said. "How about you?"

She forced her mouth to make a sound that was kind of like Alex.

"Good to meet you, Alex," he said, sticking out a calloused paw for her to shake. He had a tattoo on his giant forearm, a nude, hugely muscular woman with an old fashioned hairdo, sitting in a champagne glass with her high-heeled feet over the side. She was curling a fat barbell with one hand and holding up an oversized syringe in the other. Suspended from the tip of the needle was a single blood red droplet. Above her was a coiling banner that read "IRONMAN'S RUIN". His big hand totally swallowed Alex's, squeezing gently and not letting go for much longer than she expected.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"Alaska."

"Alaska? Alex from Alaska. Wow, you sure came a long way. I bet you don't have weather like this up in Alaska. Sunshine, the beach. I love Venice. I grew up here."

Alex wanted desperately to contribute to the conversation somehow, by saying something like, "Oh really?" or "Is that right?", but all she could seem to do was look down at her shoes and concentrate on not running away.

"Been here long?" he asked.

"A while," she replied. How long had it been? It felt like forever.

"Planning on joining the gym, huh?"

"Well..." She looked back down at the tiny spandex shorts she held in a terrified death grip.

"I'm a personal trainer," he told her. "If you decide to join, why don't you give me a call? I'm like the army, you know. I can help you be all that you can be."

He handed her a business card. It had a photo of a muscular, bikini-clad female body cut off at the neck and knees beside several phone numbers and the name "MARK BISHOP".

"Do you..." She swallowed. "Work for the gym?"

He flashed her the million-dollar smile again. "Not exactly. But everybody knows me here."

He winked again like they were sharing some naughty private joke, then turned and raised his hand to the fit blonde at the desk.

"Tanya, hook up my friend Alex here with a good deal, willya." He turned back to Alex. "Tanya will help get you started. When you're all set up, give me a call."

"Okay," Alex said awkwardly.

"And I think those shorts would look great on you."

He turned to go and she stood there stupidly. She watched him walk away. He greeted every single person he saw along the way by name, shaking hands and slapping backs.

The blonde finally spoke to her. "I can get you set up over here."

"Right," Alex said, making her way over to the desk.

"Do you want to buy those shorts?" the woman asked.

Alex looked down in horror to see she was still clutching the tiny shorts. "Uh, yeah," she said. She let the woman take them from her shaking hands and hit the label with a price scanner. They turned out to be way more expensive than she'd realized and there was no way she could ever leave the house in something so skimpy, but she was

too embarrassed to say anything about it. Then the woman made her fill out a long, complicated questionnaire about her "fitness goals" and asked her lots of questions. She pinched Alex's arm, back and belly with a machine that apparently measured her fat. The woman weighed her, measured her height and wrote it all down, but Alex could barely concentrate on any of it. All she could think about were those blue eyes and that dazzling smile.

The woman was saying something about personal trainers, that she could have a free session with her membership and Alex tried to pay better attention, to focus on what the woman was saying.

"What about Mark?" Alex asked.

An odd, unreadable expression flickered over the blonde's smooth perfect features.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable with a female trainer?" she asked. "We have several excellent female trainers here. I can set you up with an appointment to see Janice. She's nice, good with beginners."

"I'll..." She looked down at the clipboard and the form outlining her fitness goals. "I'll think about it, okay?"

That was the problem. She could think of little else. Sitting alone in her tiny apartment, behind the counter at the store, on the beach staring out at the ocean, she thought of nothing but those bright blue eyes and the warm calloused grip of his hand. She called him the next day.

As she dressed to meet him for her first training session at the gym, she put the little shorts on and took them off about twelve times. Finally, wearing the shorts and a man's white T-shirt that hung down and mostly covered them, she stood in front of the full-length mirror, examining herself in minute detail, comparing every part of her body to that of the muscular blonde in the store. Her skin was clear and thin, but still mostly pale, only slightly tanned on the arms and shoulders. Her white legs were long and lanky with no real hips to speak of but her waist was narrow so it sort of balanced her out visually. She'd always hated the wide, bony shoulders that made her modest, A cup breasts look even smaller on her broad flat chest. But that blonde had big shoulders too, far bigger than Alex's and hers

were thick with bulging muscle. Alex tried to envision herself that big, imagining her lanky skeleton buried beneath layer after layer of living steel. The thought sent a weird, almost sexual skitter of sensation over the goose bumps covering her skin.

Carefully, she tied her hair back from her face and lined her wolf-green eyes with smoky, charcoal gray. She was twenty minutes early for her appointment.

She stood there, crucified with shyness as she waited, feeling naked in her skimpy, skintight shorts, unconsciously pulling down on the T-shirt to cover them. But she could well have been genuinely naked and it wouldn't have mattered anyway, because nobody even noticed her. Prides of flawlessly sleek, tan and toned girls in cute pink outfits and handsome, muscular men clutching duffle bags and plastic shaker cups moved gracefully past her as if she was invisible. She felt like she was back in school, cringing, unnoticed by her locker, while all the pretty popular kids chatted, flirted and laughed, moving in their own exclusive world that might as well have been a million miles away.

"Hey there," Mark said, from behind again, startling her. How did such a big guy move so quietly?

"Hi," she said, barely more than a whisper.

He was studying her body with a narrow, speculative eye, taking in everything and making her feel like a car, or a horse he was considering for purchase. That feeling was not entirely unpleasant. Then, her horror, he abruptly yanked up the T-shirt to look at her stomach and waist, turning her around to take in her butt and legs in the skimpy shorts.

"You know, you have outstanding bones," he said. "Outstanding."

"Thanks," she said. No one had ever said anything like that to her in her life. Jake had gone on and on about her legs and her eyes, but never said a word about her bones.

"What do you say we get started?" he asked, taking her elbow and guiding her into the hot, clanking beehive of the weight room.

She nodded and let herself be led, unresisting. She felt jittery and anxious and deliciously excited all at once. He liked her. He liked her

bones. It made her feel real again for the first time since Jake dumped her. She felt noticed.

Her mind struggled to grasp all the complex and intriguing exercise machines, each one focused on a single muscle or group of muscles. There were handles to pull, platforms to push and all manner of strange, wondrous motions to be executed. As he demonstrated each new task, she gave more attention to the huge, bulging muscles jumping and flexing beneath his skin than the machine he strained against. She found she wanted desperately to please him and the ache and burn in her body as he pushed her to do five more, two more, one more, it felt almost good. Like stretching after a long car ride, or growing wings. She was pouring sweat, her heart pounding from exertion and his closeness as he stood behind her, his big hands cupping the backs of her arms gently as she pulled down on a dangling, knotted rope, asking her if she could feel it right there.

After it was over, he insisted on taking her out to lunch. She wanted more than anything to go home to shower first. She felt shy about the rich fresh smell of sweat clinging to her body and clothes, but he insisted that she could not afford to wait. Diet and nutrition were critical to overall fitness. After burning all that energy in the gym, she needed to refuel right away. When she suggested she could grab something at home, he scoffed.

"You don't put cheap gas in a Ferrari, do you?" he asked as he led her into a sunny little outdoor restaurant that was filled with body builders. "You are a Ferrari, Alex. From now on, I want only premium fuel to pass those lips. Understood?"

His calling her a Ferrari and talking about her lips, combined with the giddy endorphin rush of post-workout euphoria, made her feel close to swooning. As they passed all the other people in the restaurant, Mark stopped to greet everyone and, to Alex's surprise, he introduced her every time.

"This is Alex," he would say. "You're gonna be seeing a lot of her."

Everybody craned their necks to see her and seemed to whisper about her when she passed. One woman that Mark had introduced as Katrina Lane, a hulking redhead with leathery skin and a blunt,

mannish and acne-scarred face, gave Alex the most hateful, poisonous glare, but Mark smiled.

"Don't mind Katrina," he told Alex once they passed the bitter red head. "She's jealous, because she's a used up old hag and knows you're gonna blow her out of the water."

Alex felt as if she were on the arm of an actor or a rock star. She would not have been surprised if flashbulbs started going off around her.

He ordered her a huge, nearly raw tuna steak and insisted that she eat every single bite.

"Alex," he said, watching her eat with the almost lecherous delight of a man watching a strip tease. "I've worked with a lot of women in my time. A lot of champions. I know potential when I see it and I'm looking at it right now. Your genetics are truly awesome. There is no doubt in my mind that you could be a star. The only question is that of will. It's not an easy road. It takes more dedication, more brass, more sheer force of will than any other sport. I can help you, but you have to trust me completely. You have to be willing to let me do what I do best, but if you put yourself completely in my hands, Alex, I can make you a champion."

In a giddy rush, she told him about the blonde in the store, how impressed Alex had been by her physique and the reactions of the men who wanted her autograph. As Alex spoke, a slow, knowing smile spread across his lips.

"Annika is thirty-six. She's hanging on to Ms Olympia by connections alone. She doesn't have one-tenth the genetics you have. She has no waist. Thick joints."

He took Alex's wrist in his hand and she blushed down to her collarbone.

"Look at this," he said, caressing the back of her wrist with his thumb. "Slender, elegant, gorgeous vascularity."

Alex had no idea what vascularity was, but she didn't care. This was her dream, her ultimate makeover, and Mark was really looking at her, making her feel like the center of the universe. Like a champion. She did not resist when he invited her back to his apartment.

***

In the months that followed, Alex often felt as if she were dying over and over again. First there was the agony of breast augmentation surgery. Not huge, a nice, round C cup. Mark had paid for this expensive procedure, insisting it would make her look more "balanced" and "feminine". It was horrifically painful, but Mark was there every minute, doting on her, caring for her, buoying her up with pain pills and crushed ice, and he made her feel like a treasured thing. The love-starved Alex ate up the attention with two forks.

Then, once she was healed came the brutal training: killing drop sets and super sets that left her nearly unable to walk; the endless cardio, with Mark pushing her harder and faster while an uncomfortable heart monitor measured every desperate beat; the gallons of water, the thick, awful shakes; and handfuls of vitamins and other mysterious pills. "Supplements" he called them. Pounds and pounds of protein, every two hours, until the simple act of chewing and swallowing felt more difficult than lifting weights. Then there was all the cosmetic revamping Mark arranged for her. Her longed-for makeover. She lay under tanning beds until her pale skin was a rich, nut brown. Mark sent her to an expensive salon for an updated style and golden highlights for her long, straight, brown hair. He threw out all her clothes except the shorts she had purchased the day they met. He took her shopping on Rodeo Drive, spending what had to be thousands of dollars on designer dresses and heels and fancy sunglasses. He even bought her all new make-up from the MAC store and made her toss all the cruelty free stuff she got at a discount from her old job, which he made her quit less than a week after they met. She didn't have time to waste in that dump, he told her, and if she ever needed any money, she was to ask him.

Every morning, he laid out what she would wear in the gym, and what she would wear out afterward. His taste was so much better than hers, she couldn't complain. When he dressed her, picked out her lipstick and her shoes. She always looked fabulous, better than on the makeover shows.

And beneath the new clothes, the changes in her body surprised and amazed her. She hardly recognized herself when she stood nude before the full length posing mirror in the new apartment Mark had moved her into, a block from the gym, to make things more convenient.

Then, nearly six months from the day they met, Mark stood behind the naked, oiled and gleaming Alex with a syringe and a glass vial with a rubber top. It was time, he had told her, to start her on some stronger supplements. When Alex asked what was in the little vial, he smiled indulgently and told her not to worry. It was complicated. She needed to concentrate on memorizing her new posing routine, remembering to smile, keep her hands open and graceful, her movements fluid and smooth. Mark would take care of everything else.

The act of injecting her hard, muscular buttock seemed to inflame him beyond all reason. He took her from behind where she stood, eyes all over her reflection in the wall of mirror as he told her she belonged to him. She knew it was true. She loved him. The pain of the injection was less than the pain inflicted by her average daily workout. It didn't seem like that big a deal.

On the new "supplements", her body went through bizarre and frightening changes. She gained a tremendous amount of weight almost at once and when she tentatively questioned him about her new layer of fat, he patted her hand and told her not to worry her pretty little head. There were other things, too. Her already husky voice cracked and deepened. Enormous, angry zits appeared across her formerly pristine skin. She was mortified when her upper lip suddenly darkened with soft, wispy hair and her pubic hair crept up her belly and down her the insides of her thighs, thicker and more impossible to shave than ever. Mark sent her off for expensive facials and sugar waxing and electrolysis, but Alex was deeply disturbed by these radical changes in her appearance, She hated the thick lumpy fat that now padded her formerly lean body. This couldn't possibly be right, could it? Why was she so fat? She felt sick and bloated and dizzy, and frequently found herself bursting into tears for no reason.

It didn't seem to make any sense, but Mark refused to explain and started to get short with her endless whining about her weight

"Look, either you trust me, or you don't," he said. "You want to be a champion, don't you?"

She did, more than anything, but she was utterly miserable. He had changed her diet again, almost totally eliminating all carbohydrates. It made her feel sludgy and stupid. He no longer told her what to eat; he filled her fridge with color-coded Tupperware containers. Never mind what's in them. White for the first meal of the day, blue for the second, green for the third, red for the fourth and so on, until the end of each eternal day when she felt that one more bite of cold, hateful protein would make her puke her guts up. She found herself looking desperately forward to the single cup of plain oatmeal she was allowed every other day as if it were birthday cake.

He was also endlessly revising her "stack", mixing, and matching the bottles from which he injected her like some kind of mad scientist. At one point, screaming frustration overtook her and she refused to be injected, demanding to know what was in those bottles. He had given her such a scathing look that she wanted to curl up and die. After that, he started punishing her in sadistic and creative ways. He made her run up and down a long flight of outdoor stairs carrying ten-pound weights in each hand, over and over again. He made her stand in the middle of the weight room in front of everyone, holding five pound plates straight out in front of her for endless minutes until tears streamed down her cheeks and her arms felt as if they would snap.

His favorite punishment was "the chair". He would make her lean against the wall and bend her legs as if she were sitting on an imaginary chair. If he was feeling particularly sadistic, he would make her hold the heavy medicine ball while she kept that agonizing position until her legs felt full of knives and shook so bad she thought she would scream. While she sat in her imaginary chair, he would go into endless detail about everything that was wrong with her. He would berate her, put her down and make her feel stupid and worthless. She was nothing without him and he made sure to remind

her of that fact several times every day. He did not allow her to speak to anyone at the gym anymore and made her wear loose clothing to disguise her transforming body whenever she appeared in public.

She felt like a slave, every minute of every day under his complete control. Even when she needed to relieve herself, he was there in the bathroom with her, wanting to examine her stool to see if he needed to revise her diet. Privacy was a forgotten dream. He was with her twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He seemed to have endless money, but did not appear to work in any way Alex could understand. The only things he ever did that were not directly related to Alex were his own workout, and his constant meeting of people to pick up or drop off the little rubber-stoppered bottles. People, whom Alex was not allowed to speak to or meet, were always stopping by the house at strange hours, but Alex thought nothing of it. There was no room in her mind for anything but training, eating and avoiding Mark's punishments.

On top of her endless humiliation and torment, her sex drive had suddenly increased a thousand fold, and she was often hit with waves of sudden, inexplicable desire so hot and powerful she thought she would die if it could not be fulfilled instantaneously. Mark seemed to know this and loved withholding sex from her as yet another way to punish her myriad misdeeds. Torn and fought over inside like a chew toy between aching desire and smoldering anger, she desperately struggled to bury it all in the all-consuming agony of her training. She loved him. He knew what was best. He was only cruel to her because he wanted her to be all that she could be.

But as endless and awful as her days felt, her body was changing again. The fat was melting away like marble chipped off by a sculptor and she could not believe her eyes. The body revealed beneath the fat was enormous, shredded and gleaming, an anatomy fetishist's dream of striated musculature and bulging veins. She was a monster. A gorgeous, glistening monster and Mark was the proud Dr Frankenstein standing behind her with his syringe and his ambition.

"You're ready," he said, taking her into his arms and making her feel like it was really worth it after all.

She was ready. She was ready for anything.

She took both novice and heavyweight at Queen of Steel that spring and beat Katrina Lane without cracking a sweat. Alex's quads were legendary, breathtaking and the posing routine Mark developed for her took full advantage of those famous legs, showing them off with every move. She nailed her pro card in record time, and it was widely acknowledged that she was a serious contender for Ms Olympia. She finally met Annika van der Heyden and was amazed by how small and thin the blonde's legs looked next to hers. Alex was on the cover of six different magazines. Fans mobbed her anywhere she went.

Men offered her thousands of dollars to worship her legs, though Mark would never allow anything like that. It didn't matter how often she had to wax back the ever-thickening hair on her body, or the fact that she needed to wear a plastic shield beneath her posing suit to conceal the dramatic swelling between her legs. It didn't matter that Mark was punishing her more and more often, violently paranoid anytime she so much as spoke to another man. It didn't matter that she was becoming more and more reliant on Mark's various pills and injections to help her get started in the morning, to keep her going through her workout, to subdue the raging pain in her body and her mind and to get to sleep at night. None of that mattered. Alex was on top of the world. She had it all. Until the day Mark sent her to the gym alone.

"I've got a bunch of paperwork to sort out back at the office," he told her. "I've made arrangements for you to work with Don this week."

Don Knute was a sweet-natured, older man who had retired from pro-bodybuilding, but was still quite famous for his line of custom formulated protein shakes. He was helpful and had all kinds of new and innovative ways for Alex to maximize her workout, but she could not shake the icy paranoia that gripped her. Something was up. Why was Mark suddenly giving her all this freedom?

The week ground on without him, and Alex felt more uneasy. When Katrina Lane saw her with Don and gave her a smug, knowing look, Alex stormed over to the leg press machine where the redhead was working out.

"You have something to say to me?" Alex asked, raw, red anger pulsing inside her.

"Working out with Don, I see," Katrina said, letting the weight slam down and standing up, stretching up to her toes and twisting her back. "I knew Mark would get sick of you eventually. Any day now, you'll get the speech about how you've made it, how you're a champion and you don't need him anymore. The truth is he doesn't need you anymore. It's all about the transformation for him. Always has been. As soon as his girls are all huge and strung out he dumps them for the next fresh canvas." She smirked. "Believe me, I oughta know."

Several male bodybuilders were dragging her off Katrina before Alex ever realized she had taken a swing. The seething, red rage had eclipsed all her senses in the blink of an eye. She had never hit another person in her life. She had never even raised her voice and now she was flailing against the muscular arms that held her back, screaming like an angry wolverine.

A man she had never met was whispering in her ear. "Breathe, baby," he said. "It's the 'roids. That's it baby, keep breathing."

Katrina stood, wiping blood from her split lip and shaking her head like she felt sorry for Alex. The red head turned and walked away and Alex's primal, ferocious desire to rip her limb from limb began to fade slowly, replaced quickly by another kind of fury.

She ran from the gym without another word to Don. She kept running until she got to Mark's "office", his old apartment, the place where he first made love to her, where he first made her feel like a champion. She crept along the walkway to his door, bright paranoia back again and blazing, sharp as broken glass in the back of her mouth. It was as if she was watching herself from somewhere else as she raised her foot in its brand new Otomix athletic boot and smashed open his door in one powerful kick.

She saw him on his cellphone, standing in the living room, eyes wide as saucers. Don was probably trying to warn him, but was too late. Mark was naked. So was the blonde on the leather sofa behind him.

Every humiliation, every shameful punishment, everything Alex had endured to please him came flooding back, along with the horrible realization that Katrina was right. He was planning to dump her, like Jake. To throw her away like a used Kleenex. She looked back at the blonde, who was pretty and smug, like the girl in the van who came to pick up Jake's things. She was laughing at her, and the smoldering anger flamed up with magnesium fury, obliterating everything.

What happened next was still hard for her to piece together. She knew exactly what she had done, because it had been recounted over and over again in endless, forensic detail at her trial, but it never really seemed real to her. For her, things became elongated and strange like bad, jittery slow motion, a loud buzzing like angry hornets filling her ears as she looked down to see her hands gloved to the elbows in dripping blood. Mark was on the floor in front of her. There was a soft, red mess where his head used to be.

The blonde looked like she was screaming, but Alex couldn't hear anything apart from an endless, infernal buzzing. Then there was more silent screaming and bloody hanks of blonde hair in her fists, but the blonde was gone. And who was this other guy? This Mexican man in a green shirt, trying to cover his head with bloody arms? At some point, she thought she remembered being attacked by the dog, but she had barely felt the bites on her forearms as she slammed the loose bundle of fur against the wall of the building again and again. She was shot twice but didn't feel it. She didn't remember a single thing about the cops, but she would never ever forget the look on the face of the young wife of the cop whose neck she had snapped with no more thought for him than that of the dog. The wife was pregnant. Alex wished herself dead a thousand times in the courtroom.

Her trial was a media circus. Sidebars about steroid abuse ran beside her story in the *LA Times* and *Newsweek*, and famous athletes fell all over themselves to judge and condemn her and deny that they themselves had ever stooped so low. Bodybuilders she had seen buying the little bottles from Mark clucked their tongues and went on and on about what a shame it was that drugs were ruining the sport.

Her lawyer tried to portray her as a victim of abuse, and probably could have got her life in prison if she had killed only Mark. But there was the blonde: a pretty, intelligent student at USC with dreams of becoming an archeologist. The gardener, a deeply religious family man who had supported his six daughters and disabled mother on his meager salary while taking night classes to become a certified public accountant. Even the dog, Krueger the German shepherd, a proud graduate of the K9 police academy on his first assignment. The media really had a field day with the dog. Never mind the cop. The cop and his sweet, heartbroken, pregnant wife. The photos of her victims, particularly the photo of the happy, panting police dog with his smiling trainer, tore her up inside. She was glad they sentenced her to death. She deserved it.

The first month at Chowchilla was the worst of her life. The black, crushing despair. The howling withdrawal from Mark's cornucopia of pharmaceuticals, which she learned during the trial included such healthy natural supplements as demerol, vicodin, methamphetamines and cocaine. Without the steroids her body had become accustomed to, she was swamped with bottomless depression as her physique softened and dissolved before her eyes. She could not wait for the gas chamber. Death, and the end of her guilt and despair, was all she had to look forward to. The faces of her victims and worse, the faces of their grieving families, tormented her day and night.

Then, one morning, something changed. It was no one thing, no specific event that brought about the change. Nobody sat her down and explained it to her. She woke up with the sudden, crystalline realization that everything that had gone wrong in her life came about because she had relied on others, on men, to tell her what to do and who to be. Alone, she was nothing. She was not even a person. She was a tool to be used and discarded. All her life, she'd let herself be that way. She did not want to die that way.

That morning, she started doing crunches and push-ups in her tiny cell. The familiar exercise felt good, and cleared her head of the bleak hopelessness that had consumed her. She had only a short time left on this earth, and she intended to make it count. She read

voraciously and started a journal, filling notebooks with her dense, manic script. She was determined to be her own woman, to die her own woman. It was as if she had been born at age twenty-two. She wanted every minute of every day to count. Every minute until her last.

Then came the casting call for *Xtreme Elimination*.

In the hot and barren pen with sweat pouring off her tan and muscular body, Alex felt like she was closer than ever to becoming her own woman. She would beat *Xtreme Elimination* and gain a second chance to start her life over. To be somebody real, not because of what someone made her, but because of who she really was. She narrowed her wolf-green eyes, pulled in a deep breath and started another set.

SEVEN

Valkyrie Randall was dry shaving her head in the dark with a melted and sharpened toothbrush. She worked slowly and meticulously by feel, littering the floor of her cell at the Pocatello Women's Correctional Center with drifts of fine flaxen hair. She knew that her long white-blonde hair would provide an easy target for the other contestants on *Xtreme Elimination* and she was not willing to take any chances. First thing she planned to do when she hit the island was coat all of her exposed skin with mud, lighter in the hollows and darker on the peaks. She had always been the best at hide-and-go-seek.

When she and her five brothers were little, her father used to send them on drills in the woods surrounding the Cold Creek compound, near Sandpoint, Idaho. They would be required to find edible and medicinal plants, set snares, and skin and smoke what they caught, and her favorite drill, hide-and-go-seek.

The six of them would be driven to a new, unfamiliar location every time. One person would be the hunter and the rest would have five minutes to hide. Their father taught them how to cover their tracks and how to find the hidden tracks of the others. How to blend in, and how to see through disguises. From age five, Val had been almost unbeatable. Her brothers often had to call their father as the sun was setting to come and find Val burrowed into a rotten log or snoozing comfortably up a tree that looked impossible for her to climb.

Val was not the least bit concerned about *Xtreme Elimination*. This was what she was born to do. None of the other contestants stood a chance. Butcher Mahan may be one tough son of a bitch, but you can't put an arm bar on a poisoned pig-sticker trap. Val knew it wasn't what the brain-dead Hollywood ZOG puppets wanted to see, but she knew that the way to win was to go to ground, to lay low, let the aggressive ones kill each other and then meticulously pick off the survivors with snares and traps. No point exposing herself to the danger of hand-to-hand combat unless it was absolutely necessary.

The prospect of getting out of this subhuman zoo of a prison made her pulse quicken. To be out in the clean, wild world, far from the hoards of drug-addicted race traitors and degenerate mud people would be a kind of heaven. Once she won *Xtreme Elimination*, she hoped to meet a new man. A brilliant, brave, white warrior like her beloved late husband James, who was killed alongside her father by the ATF pigs when they came to raid the Cold Creek compound. Her father had married the two of them himself the day of her seventeenth birthday. It was the happiest day of her life, the day she also received her tattoo, writ in her beloved husband's own hand: "PROUD WHITE WOMAN" in a banner above her heart. But to her endless shame, she had been unable to live up to that banner flowing across her chest. Though she tried and tried, she did not bear him any children. She had prayed on it with James every single night, and with her father, but God did not see fit to bless her with the beautiful blonde babies she longed for.

Though her father never came out and blamed her for her barrenness, he had told her not to blame God, but to look inside herself and see if there was some hidden sin, some subtle misdeed in thought or action that was preventing her from fulfilling her destiny as a White Woman. She saw nothing, but feared that her inability to see was part of her sin. She knew it was all part of God's special challenge for her, like *Xtreme Elimination* would be part of His divine test. She had no doubt that she would pass, but pride was a sin too, so she bowed her newly shorn head and prayed. She begged God for guidance and strength and for advanced forgiveness in case she wound up killing any white contestants. She asked her father, her brothers and her beloved James to look down on her from heaven. She swore that she would make them proud,

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AK Henrow was reading *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu when he got the news that he had been chosen for that murder show. He knew the book almost by heart, but he figured it looked all badass and shit, and thought maybe a camera crew might come by to catch his

reaction to the news of his acceptance. He was fastidious and well groomed. He was concerned with his appearance, with representing his set and putting out the best possible face for the 48 Straights, but on the inside, in his heart of hearts, he had to admit that he was terrified. Scared as the thirteen year-old kid he had been the day he went along on his first mission and got jumped into the Straights. He was afraid that he had become soft in the three years he'd been behind bars. That he had lost the steel, the edge, the thick emotional callous that it took to be a stone cold killer.

He had always been an expert manipulator, ruthlessly intelligent and articulate with a corporate CEO's instinct for pitting his underlings against each other. He often gave two soldiers the same assignment, to see who would do a better job. He delighted in spreading rumors and gathering information from his various spies and minions. Being behind bars had only increased his power. He was handsome and charismatic, a born leader, no question about it, but he no longer seemed to have that real meat and potatoes lust for killing that some of his younger, more sociopathic foot soldiers possessed. He needed to find a way back into that blood thirsty youthful mindset he'd left behind when he got sent up for the murder of those two cops.

He was twenty-seven and it had been way too long since he had fresh blood on his hands. He found himself dwelling on that first mission, on how it made him feel to put a bullet in a living breathing target for the first time and trying to imagine feeling that way again.

It was hot, the kind of scorching urban summer that clung to your skin and made you feel dirty no matter how many showers you took. There was a block several streets down from AK's building that had been up for grabs between the Straights and a rival gang called the U Street Crew. AK was a little homie back then. A wannabe with no cred, a bad haircut and more attitude than sense.

Unlike many of the other kids that hung around the fringes of the Straights organization, AK, then plain Andrew, came from a benign, two parent home. His father was a postal worker and his mother a hairdresser. His childhood was utterly unremarkable. They were poor, but life was quiet and mostly happy. He and his three sisters

were intelligent and excelled in school, but it all seemed like a pointless game to young Andrew. Get good grades, be a good little drone so you can graduate and then what? Get a job in the post office so you could bust your ass on the nine to five grind to scratch out a meager living in a white man's world? Bullshit.

Walking home from school with his chatterbox sisters, he watched the Straights doing business on the corners. They were loaded with gold, drove the best cars and had the hottest women all around them. They were urban royalty, bigger than life like movie action heroes, only better because they were black, like Andrew. Given a choice between becoming one of them and becoming an exhausted, broken old man like his father, Andrew knew without a doubt what he wanted to be. Because more than the gold, more than the cars and the women, he wanted power. Power was what really mattered.

So on that hot summer night, an older banger named Shawn "Remy" Martin had placed an enormous Russian assault rifle in Andrew's little hands, pointed him in the direction of the contested building and told Andrew to come back with an empty magazine. Andrew had been utterly terrified, and making his feet move beneath him, making them carry him into the smoking chaos of battle was the hardest thing he had ever done. He killed three that night. One had been a kid his own age, and that kid had looked right at Andrew before he pulled the trigger. The kid's eyes were wide, bright and terrified before they disappeared into a hot spray of blood and bone fragments. Andrew wanted to throw up, watching that kid fall awkwardly backward into some sickly-looking rose bushes and lay there twitching and pissing himself. But Andrew didn't throw up. He emptied his clip like he was told.

When they got back to the crib to savor their victory, Remy poured Andrew some fancy French champagne in a delicate, stemmed glass, like they were at some rich white party in the movies.

"Did you see my little homeboy rockin' that AK like he was born with it?" Remy said, hand on Andrew's shoulder like a proud uncle. "I told you he was down." He clinked his glass against Andrew's. "Stone cold solid, motherfucker!"

That's how Andrew came to be known as "Lil AK".

After that first time, AK began to refine his technique, to savor the act of killing. He kept his eyes wide open and watched as his victims' lives flowed out of them like their blood on the hot pavement. He mimicked Remy's icy dead stare and casual brutality and learned to prolong the lives of his victims like a cat toying with an injured bird. That crazy, endless summer changed his life forever. AK knew that he needed to find his way back to that killing summer, to reconnect with who he used to be. He knew that he could do it. His set was counting on him and he would rather die drowning in his own blood than ever let them down.

***

Sissy Keene was gonna be on the TeeVee. She never even had TeeVee until they put her in this place with all the bars where everybody had to wear the same outfit. She had seen TeeVee a few times before when she went down into town for feed and supplies and all, or when she went looking for a new boyfriend. They had one in the Stop-n-Shop and one in the Golden Rule Bar, but she had never really paid it any mind. Stuck with nothing much to do most of the time, she couldn't believe half the things she saw on the little square screen bolted into a cage up in the corner of her cell. Everybody on the TeeVee was real pretty and half naked most of the time. There were all these big, juicy burgers and different kinds of shampoo that were better than sex and all kinds of things that were on special sale for only nineteen ninety-five.

Sissy understood that she was in a whole lot of trouble on account of the business with them little babies and all, but honestly, except for the part where they was fixing to kill her with a shot, or in the electric chair if she wanted, it really wasn't all that bad. She had her own indoor toilet right there in her cell, so she never had to go stumbling out in the middle of the chilly night when nature called. She had electricity and running water. And her own TeeVee. They gave her clothes that were way nicer than the ones she made for herself back home and they brought her three meals a day, already

cooked like in a restaurant. Her life was pretty damn good when you sat down and thought about it.

But there was this exciting Christmastime kind of feeling in her belly because something new and amazing had happened. Some folks from Hollywood California had come to talk to her. Her: Sissy Keene. Can you believe that? They brought cameras and asked her if she wanted to be on this killing game show called *Xtreme Elimination*, with an X. At first Sissy thought they had to be kidding, since the judge at her trial told her that killing people was wrong and she ought to feel bad about it. But they weren't kidding so Sissy allowed that she might enjoy being part of a game like that. After all, she had found killing people was way easier than killing hogs and she only had to kill these eleven and then she wouldn't have to have that killing shot after all. She could spend the rest of her life in a place even nicer than the one she was in. Imagine that. Sissy figured she was pretty sheltered, living alone up on the mountain like she did. When she was a little girl, her daddy had told her that the world was a bad sinful place, but, God rest his soul, Sissy was thinking maybe her daddy had been wrong after all.

***

Travis Henry was pleasantly surprised when he received the news of his selection for *Xtreme Elimination*. Federal death row was located in the US Penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana. There were plenty of other men there who, it seemed to Travis, would have made far better choices. Men convicted of terrorist activities. Wonderful fanatics, eyes blazing with telegenic madness. But, he supposed, pulling the political strings required to get someone like that for the show was probably more than even Hollywood royalty could swing. In truth, it was amazing they were able to pull anyone from the Federal pen at all.

Travis was not much to look at. It's not that he was ugly. Bland. Generic. A background player with no lines. A spear carrier. It was his inoffensive and unremarkable appearance that had been such a

blessing in his own chosen calling, but he never thought it would make him a television star.

Travis was a federal agent. A spook. Eff-Bee-Eye. He had graduated from the Academy at Quantico, square in the middle of his class. He was average in every way, and fellow agents and teachers that had been interviewed after his arrest could remember almost nothing about him. But Travis was, in fact, quite exceptional. He hid it well. You see, his job as a federal investigator was not his true calling. His true calling was something far more profound.

As a student, he made a distinct effort not to excel at any one subject, particularly not the one that interested him the most. He did not want to stand out, to be remembered as being fascinated with the psychological profiling of serial murderers. Because Travis was not really studying to hunt killers, he was studying to become one.

Travis possessed a deadly kind of patience, meticulously studying and preparing for his own personal final exam. He felt no particular desire to kill a specific person, or type of person. In fact over the course of his studies, he learned that limiting yourself to a certain type of victim was a sure way to get caught. He felt no sexual impulse in conjunction with the desire to torture and kill. His sex life was quite normal, as bland and unremarkable as his appearance. The three bookish and shy women he dated during the height of his killing career never had a clue. He often wished aloud that he were more adventurous and exciting.

The real thrill for Travis came from getting away with murder. From breaking the most basic and primal of human taboos and getting away scot-free. He tortured his victims, each one in a unique and creative way that cleverly mimicked a different pathology. He did this, not to enjoy their reactions to their suffering, but rather to make the crime more appalling, the manhunt more intense and his evasion of justice that much sweeter. Travis found that he felt absolutely nothing for any of his victims, not even the children. Or anyone on the planet, for that matter. He did not even understand the concept of pets, though he kept a cat to avoid suspicion and to make himself appear more normal.

He did not understand the concept of love either, though he read about it extensively in order to learn what to say to the women he dated. Sex was physically enjoyable to him, but no more so than masturbation. He felt little in the way of emotion most of the time, but the euphoric high he felt watching his colleagues and fellow agents flounder and stall and writhe in moral outrage and howling frustration as they struggled to conceive of who would do such a thing, that was what he lived for.

Of course, when he did get caught, it was the oldest and most basic mistake in the book that did him in. He was sure he was immune to something so simple, but as he cut a swath across America, killing fearlessly and laughing at the impotent police and bumbling agents, he got cocky. He started to feel almost superhuman, as if he could not be caught. He started leaving taunting clues. Notes.

It was a woman who caught him. A female agent who was fat, smug and had always hated him. He could not resist taunting her personally. She proved to be sharper and more intuitive, not to mention more physically resilient, than he ever could have guessed. She was almost taken off the case when she suggested him as a suspect. He came up with a flawless plan to kill her and make it appear as an accident, but, miraculously, she survived and he was taken into custody that night.

He was reduced to being some tawdry, television-age gladiator for the entertainment of the sheep-like, brain-dead masses. He could easily outwit the other contestants and once transferred to a more lax facility, he would figure a way to escape and get back to what he did best. It was a real crime for a brilliant mind such as his to be wasted on crossword puzzles and popular novels. But until that time, he had to concentrate on getting this *Xtreme Elimination* foolishness out of the way. There was no doubt in his mind that he would win.

***

Danisha Scott had always been a practical woman. She never let herself be distracted from what had to be done. When she was a child, her single mother had been a wildly irresponsible party girl

with a different date for every day of the week. For as long as she could remember, Danisha did the majority of the chores around the house. She had to, since her mother was always rushing off to some party or another and leaving Danisha to baby-sit her older sister. Danisha had to care for her sister Lisa because she was retarded. Lisa couldn't go to the potty alone or feed herself. Danisha had been caring for Lisa every day for seven years until she woke up one morning and realized that Lisa would really be better off dead. There wasn't any reason for her to live. All she did was eat and sleep and take up space and smell bad. It would really be best if she had some kind of accident.

Danisha had spent several days trying to plan the best way to kill Lisa. In the end it was so simple, it was almost like it was meant to be.

Danisha took her to the park every Thursday. She would sit sister her on a bench to watch the pigeons while Danisha read or did her homework. The elevator in their building was out of order and they had to take the stairs down from their third floor apartment. Lisa was clumsy and was always tripping on the stairs. Her thick legs were all bruised from bumping her shins again and again. As Lisa and Danisha stood at the top of the stairs, Lisa stumbled, reaching her hands out to Danisha. It was as if the moment elongated into flawless slow motion and instead of taking hold of her reaching hand, Danisha gave Lisa a hard shove in the center of her chest. Lisa fell end over end, smashing her undersized head against the cracked marble stairs as she went. When she came to rest on the second floor landing, she didn't move. There was blood on the little octagonal white tiles.

Mrs Jackson, their downstairs neighbor, came running up the steps and took Danisha in her huge fat arms, covering Danisha's face.

"Don't look, baby," Mrs Jackson crooned. "Oh my God, baby. Don't look."

All in all , murdering Lisa had been a satisfying experience. No one ever suspected her. She did not cry or even seem that upset, but her new therapist at school told her mother that it was normal for some grieving children to block out their emotions in times of severe

emotional stress. Danisha did not disagree with the therapist. It was an excellent cover story.

Later, when Danisha had completed nursing school and applied for a job at the Castille Forner Center for Mentally Disabled Adults, she sited the traumatic accidental death of her sister as her reason for wanting to work with the mentally disabled. This was true, but not in the way that her employers might have imagined.

Danisha had come to the understanding that it was her destiny in life to euthanize those for whom life had no meaning. She was doing them a favor, putting them out of their misery. It was the practical thing to do. Anyone could see that.

She got away with it for a staggering seven years. Seven years and twenty-one deaths. Many of the patients had other medical complications in addition to their mental disabilities and early deaths were not uncommon. It was not until the center lost its funding that things really got out of hand.

Danisha knew there was no place else for her patients to go. They would be sent off to awful state-run facilities and left to rot for the rest of their useless lives. She decided that she needed to help them all right away.

She got through nine patients before one of the other night nurses caught her and called the police. When she was arrested she showed no remorse. She did not understand why everyone was so upset about it. There was a sound byte that ran over and over on the news of Danisha in cuffs staring coldly into the camera and saying, "They put cats to sleep, don't they? It's no different."

So Danisha was in a dank prison, waiting to be put to sleep herself. She could not even really get upset about that either. However, something unusual had happened, something totally unexpected. She had been invited to be on a television show. All she had to do was kill eleven people and she would get to live out the rest of her life in a plush, minimum-security country club. A place that would be easy to escape from. Danisha, being a practical woman, figured that winning the murder show would be the best way to get back to helping the people who needed her.

***

Beto Nuñez sat in his cell at the Terrell Unit in Livingston, Texas and wolfed down his cold dinner as fast as he could to avoid tasting the lumpy instant mashed potatoes, cold gristly meatloaf and slimy canned green beans. He had been on death row for three years and had not had a single warm meal since his incarceration for killing a border patrol officer. It made no sense to him that the food was always cold. The kitchen was a mere two minutes away from the death row unit, yet the food often sat there on the cart for an hour or more before it was served. But it took more than cold food to keep Beto down.

He possessed a clever and agile mind, always thinking ten steps ahead. He had started off in life with everything against him, an orphan living on the streets of a rough barrio in Laredo, begging and stealing and fighting every day for every single thing he ever had. He and several other nine year-olds had formed what they called a junior gang, specializing in purse snatching and pocket picking. He learned to steal cars, strapping bricks to his feet to reach the pedals. By the time he graduated to drug running, he had already killed two men. It was a dog-eat-dog world, and Beto would do anything to survive.

The opportunity to audition for the murder show was a blessing from heaven. He knew he could easily turn the situation to his advantage. He would not waste any time playing their stupid game. He would find a way to escape as quickly as possible. When he was free, he would disappear into South America. Find a good woman and settle down, far away from Los Estados Unidos, with all its television madness. Beto was through with killing. He wanted to live.

***

Felice Delacoste had always found a way to get what she wanted. It wasn't difficult. Ever since her adolescent chest and hips began to swell, she had been able to manipulate and control the men around her. It was so pathetically easy. Just the promise of that one silly

little thing would make men act like trained seals. They bought her cars and jewelry and expensive clothing, anything she wanted but it was never enough. Felice decided that she would rather have the money and skip having to do that one silly little thing over and over. It wasn't that hard to plan. Being a girl took a lot of work. All the beauty treatments, Brazilian waxing, hair styling, step aerobics, high-heeled shoes and everything that it took to be the object of men's desire were really much harder than pulling a swift straight razor across her first husband's throat. The hardest part was lugging the body through the house and back into the garage, where she had prepared the vat full of acid. Eventually she figured the best way was to lay her victims on a towel and pull the towel so they slid along the polished hardwood floor. It had never even occurred to her that she might get caught. Not that she didn't realize murder was bad. It was like bulimia or faking an orgasm. You weren't supposed to do it, but everybody did.

Felice had been disappointed to find that *Xtreme Elimination* sent a woman to interview her. She concentrated the whole time on an imaginary man that would be watching the tape later, a man that would decide to pick her. He would not be able to resist her. They never could. Then, once she got on the show, she would pick the strongest, toughest male contestant and use him to kill the others and get her off the island. She would deal with him later herself, but for now, she had to get ready for her big television debut.

***

Billy Dean Whitcomb never understood why all the news stories about him in the paper and on TV kept on saying that he hated women. That didn't make any kind of sense. He loved women. He loved women more than anything else in this world. He loved their soft bodies, their smells, their gentle voices and their tiny feet with the toenails painted all pretty. Their tender throats between his hands, and the smooth red insides of their screaming mouths. Nothing was better than hunting a pretty little woman like a rabbit, stalking her, following her back to her lair and taking her on her own

sweet smelling bed. He even liked it when they fought him, beating on his chest with cute little fists, all mad and feisty.

He only agreed to be on the murder show because there would be women. Sure, he would need to find a way to take care of them other fellas too, but that was pure practicality. To have a woman again, to feel a woman's body struggling against his, that would be pure heaven. Billy Dean was really a romantic at heart. If he had to die, let it be in the arms of a woman. Then he could die a happy man.

***

T-Rex really missed her babies. She had two beautiful little girls, Tina and Brittany. She had spent two years on death row in the Oregon Women's Correctional Center in Salem, two endless years since she'd seen her baby girls. They were five and three, but the state had taken them away from T-Rex and sent them to some bullshit foster home when she went up for killing that South Side bitch. It was totally unfair. Her babies needed her, not some fucking foster mother. Missing them was like the ache of a missing limb, like a hole inside her heart. She had nightmares almost every night that she went to find her daughters and when she found them, they were dressed in unfamiliar clothes and they didn't recognize her.

Her own mother had died of a drug overdose when little Teresa was four years old. After that she had been sent to live with her mother's cousin, his bitchy religious wife and their three fat boring daughters. She missed her mother every single day with a gut-deep pain that was nearly physical in its intensity. Every day she spoke to her mother in heaven and begged her to come back down for her lonely daughter. When she turned sixteen, she had her mother's portrait tattooed over her heart with her birth and death date, and her name, Ana Luisa, in flowing script. Above were the words: "Siempre en mi Corazón". Always in my heart.

The idea of her two baby girls growing up without her the way she grew up without her own mother was far worse than the threat of the death penalty. She could not believe she could be so naive as to think she would still be allowed visitation. It had been so important to her

to prove that she was down with her homegirls in the Eighteen Ladies that she had never once thought that she might lose her baby girls. She could not imagine anyone being so heartless as to separate a woman from her babies.

When she heard about *Xtreme Elimination*, she knew she would be chosen and she knew she would win. She did not even care about saving her own life. She had to win on the show so that she could be moved to a minimum-security pen where they would let her daughters visit. She would get lawyers and fight to see them. Nobody could stop her. She was their fucking mother. Nothing else mattered in life. A mother's love was the strongest force on this planet. It gave her powers, like a mama bear, or when a lady lifts up a car to protect her baby. She could not lose.

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Vu van Trung was brought to America by his parents when he was seven years old, but Versailles, the east New Orleans community where they moved, was nearly indistinguishable from Vietnam. His abusive father drowned in a boating accident less than six months after their arrival in the States, and after that his mother simply withdrew into her own world, never even getting out of bed unless it was totally unavoidable. They received a settlement from his father's death, but it was barely enough to get by on, and his mother refused to get a job or even leave the house. He ran away at eleven, leaving her slumped on the couch, staring at the unfathomable American television.

On the rough streets of the Crescent City, Vu van Trung earned the nickname "Truck" because, less than a week from leaving home, he had been hit by a produce truck and survived severe head trauma that the doctors claimed should have been fatal. After the accident, something changed inside of him, something he could never quite put his finger on. When he was jumped into the Born to Kill gang, his fellow bangers claimed that the truck that hit him had knocked loose the part of the brain that experienced fear. It was far more profound than that. It was as if the accident had killed any kind of emotion

inside him. He remembered that he had once been afraid of his father, but he could not conjure up the emotion or remember anything about what it had been like. He tried to remember happy things too, things from his childhood, presents or a friend he had liked to play with, ice cream or a girl he thought was beautiful, but it felt like a blind man trying to remember color. As the years went by, all his memories of emotion faded like colors swallowed by darkness and Truck no longer bothered trying to recall them.

He did not understand why others in the gang made such a big deal over killing. It seemed ridiculously easy to him, far easier than breaking into a house or stealing a car. Pull the trigger and the person stops living. It was so simple even a child could do it. Sure it was sometimes messy and one had to be careful not to be caught, but the act itself seemed almost anticlimactic after the older boys in the gang had built it up as this big important test to prove how badass you were.

Eventually, Truck was caught and convicted of the torture and murder of the sister of a rival gang leader. Teams of psychologists descended on him, trying to pry him open and find out what made him a killer. He gave them nothing. They stuck his head in big machines that made detailed maps of the landscape inside his head and tried to analyze his brain, but in the end, they found nothing conclusive. He simply didn't care.

He didn't really care all that much about his own imminent death either, but when a chance arose to kill again, to put off his own death and be on television too, well it sounded too good to be true. He wondered idly if his mother was still alive, if she would see him on television. That thought held nothing more than a mild curiosity.

EIGHT

Butch Mahan woke suddenly, zero to wide awake in a heartbeat, and he sat bolt upright with a kind of huge, amorphous terror racing in his veins. Where the hell was he? Everything was horribly wrong, out of place, and it was dark. Not pitch black, but dimly lit only by weak greenish light filtering in from somewhere else. He had not experienced darkness of any kind since his intake into Ely six months earlier.

His cell had been illuminated with equal intensity twenty-four hours a day, a minor annoyance at first that soon proved to be a form of not so subtle torture. He couldn't sleep more than a few minutes at a time in the beginning, but eventually, like anything, he got used to it. There he was in some dark, unknown place, and the fear that gripped him was the pure and monstrous terror of the abandoned child he used to be.

No, not an unknown place, the rational part of his mind reminded the fearful child. Not unknown at all. Just different.

Costa Rica. Right, that was it. The chaotic madness of the last forty-eight hours was beginning to filter back through his consciousness. Transferred from plane to plane, shuffling along hot, tropical airfields in leg irons and cuffs, dressed in an itchy new red jumpsuit with the lurid *Xtreme Elimination* logo on the back, surrounded by cameras with some slutty Latina babe in a pink thong bikini pushing a microphone in his face.

"Tell our viewers what's going through your mind right now, Butcher!"

"Could you not call me that?" Butch had replied, clenching his teeth and fists and battling the creeping anxiety that gripped him.

He was in a new holding cell somewhere in the middle of the fucking jungle. His eyes traced and retraced the angles of the tiny, narrow room. Maybe six by ten feet. Faded brown stains on the walls that could be blood, shit, or both. No window. Just the barred door at the far end of the room and distant, unhealthy florescent light leaking through from somewhere down the hall. There was a thick

stench of mildew in the wet, tepid air blasting from an absurdly tiny, playing card sized vent above his head. Rank, old sweat drenched his *Xtreme Elimination* jumpsuit and there was a dull, heavy ache in his bladder. He stood slowly and staggered over to the metal basin that served as both toilet and sink. He pissed long and hard, eyes closed, trying desperately not to think, to still his racing thoughts for one merciful second.

There was a sound of booted footfalls and the clicking counter tempo of cheap plastic heels and then a brace of scowling guards appeared, armed to the teeth and accompanied by the Latina girl in a new, different bikini, this one a leopard print jungle look with cheesy beaded fringe. And, of course, the ever-present camera crew in their backward baseball hats and mesh vests with too many pockets, recording everything.

One of the guards put something into the food slot in the heavy barred door and Butch looked down to see a new set of clothes, folded neatly, pristine.

"Please change clothes," the guard said in a heavy Tico accent.

Butch eyed the camera crew, squinting in their harsh glaring light. "On camera, eh?" He shook his head. "Great."

He turned away from the bars, showing them his broad back. He would do what he had to do for these vultures, but he'd be good and goddamned if he was going to flash his action on network TV.

As he peeled off the jumpsuit, he heard a breathy gush of preposterous narration from the bikini girl.

"As the Butcher strips down and prepares for battle, his fierce, highly trained muscles tense and ready for action, like a deadly panther..."

A deadly panther. Butch shook his head with a soft snort of derision. He didn't feel like a deadly panther. More like a rat in a trap.

The new clothes were more than a little odd. Cut off faded denim shorts, dory, knee-length, white tube socks with three green stripes, brand new yellowy beige leather hiking boots, and a white T-shirt with green ribbing on the sleeves and neck. The front of the shirt read "CAMP ISLA NEGRA" in green letters that were meant to look

like rough-hewn logs. There was no underwear. The shirt was skintight across his broad back, and the shorts short enough to make him feel seriously in danger of swinging in the breeze the first time he tried to throw a kick to anything higher than the knee. Or possibly in danger of being mistaken for a gay porn star from the Seventies. He felt completely ridiculous.

"Cuffs," the guard said.

Butch knew this routine all too well. He backed up to the bars and put his hands behind his back. He felt the familiar click and weight of the manacles around his wrists, then the door opened. Leg irons locked around his ankles and he was hustled unceremoniously out and down the grimy corridor with a gun barrel shoved roughly against the back of his skull and the bikini girl fondling his biceps and cooing lasciviously into the camera.

He was taken through a seemingly endless maze of shabby institutional green hallways and eventually led into a low-ceilinged cafeteria, like space with no tables. There, he finally got a look at the other contestants. As the guards fastened his leg irons to a large eyehook driven deep into the cement floor, he checked out the people he would be forced to kill if he wanted to survive.

Just looking at the women really bothered him. There was no way in hell he could make himself kill any one of them. The girl to his left was dressed in nothing but white, full back bikini bottoms beneath her own tight Camp Isla Negra T-shirt. She was a tattooed Latina gang girl with her long, dyed red hair bound in two pigtails and a practiced "fuck you" scowl on her smooth young face. Beside her was a pretty brunette Playboy type who looked terrified in her even skimpier thong bikini. She was heavily made up and her shampoo ad hair was loose and curled into a sex kitten tumble around her pinup face. She began vigorously flirting with Butch as soon as she spotted him, as if her life depended on it, which in a way, Butch guessed it probably did.

Another woman to their left wore a microscopic pink bikini top and tight pink terry cloth shorts that snugged up high between her thick ass cheeks. She looked as if she had chopped her white blonde hair down to the scalp herself with a dull knife and no mirror. The

effect of the whitish fuzz on her pink scalp made her look disconcertingly like a newborn mouse.

The other women were less provocatively dressed, which was for the best since both were quite overweight. One black and one white, they both wore knee length khaki shorts and looser fitting Camp Isla Negra T-shirts. The black woman was pretty, but stern and cold-eyed. The white woman was horrendously ugly and cheerful, as if she had no idea where she was.

Butch made a resolution that he would avoid the women at all costs, allowing them to kill each other or be done in by the other male contestants. Then he would deal with whatever men were left.

The men were all dressed similar to Butch, with varying degrees of tightness and shortness that seemed directly related to their level of physical fitness. In front of him was a handsome black man with a ripped physique and a cocky smile, wearing a ridiculous green, terry cloth headband in addition to the Camp Isla Negra getup. To his right was an antsy white guy with lots of bad prison tattoos and to his left, a wiry Mexican with bad skin and a patchy goatee, also heavily inked. On the far side of the room was a nondescript, but well groomed Caucasian man in his early forties who looked like some kind of businessman who'd got on the wrong commuter train and wound up there by mistake. On his right was an Asian man, the person Mahan knew he really had to worry about.

Everyone was trying to psyche themselves up like rookie fighters getting ready to get into the cage. Some were trying to find ways to hate everyone else, to build up the rage they would need to take the other guys out. Some were trying to be stone cold and act like it didn't matter. Butch had seen this a million times in that moment before the buzzer. The macho posturing, the stare down, whatever it took to get it up. Ace had always taught Butch that hate was a waste of energy in the cage. Fighting was a science, a martial art, and should be approached without the passion of emotion. Butch always tried to keep cool and calm, never allowing himself to be baited into stare downs or psyched out by big bad attitude, but he was only human, and he still felt that gunning of adrenaline whenever he stepped inside the cage. In all his years of fighting, he had only once

met someone who displayed no emotion whatsoever upon entering the ring, the only man who Butch had been genuinely afraid of.

That fighter was a Russian named Sadko Zajic. Zajic broke Butch's nose for the first time and knocked him out cold less than a minute later, but before all that, he stepped into the cage with a dead-eyed, near-boredom that chilled Butch to the bone. Zajic could have been waiting for a bus. He did not move at all, did not rock from foot to foot or shake his limbs or neck. He stood there with this lazy, almost reptilian nonchalance. Of all the *Xtreme Elimination* contestants in the room, this sinewy Asian man disturbed Butch profoundly because he reminded Butch of Zajic. The guy seemed almost ready to drift off to sleep, like a student enduring a dull lecture. There was no doubt in Butch's mind that this guy was going to be the one to watch out for.

Butch did a quick head count. There were only five women. There had to be one more coming. That's when the guards brought in the girl with the green eyes.

The thick, curvy tattooed girl, the Playboy bunny and the tall, bottom-heavy blonde did nothing for Butch, but the last woman to be lead into the big space and chained to the hook directly to his left made him go all hot and flustered.

She wore a red thong bikini bottom that exposed her flawless, sculpted glutes and powerful, devastating legs. Her T-shirt had been cut off to reveal washboard abs and a teasing hint of the lower swell of high, round, braless breasts too perfect to be natural. Her dark hair was bound in two girlish braids that looked utterly wrong above such a majestic physique and when her piercing, sage-green coyote eyes met his, he felt sixteen again. He was positive that he was blushing. This was the last thing on earth that he needed.

"Greetings, happy campers!"

A huge screen at the far end of the room suddenly lit up, a cheerful talking head addressing them all and distracting Butch from the confusion brought on by the muscular brunette.

"Welcome to season two of *Xtreme Elimination*. I bet you're all wondering what to expect here on the show, so I guess I'd better fill you in. Well, for starters, each and every one of you will be fitted with

our exclusive, ultra-lightweight, high-tech personal POV camera rigs."

The screen switched over to a digital graphic of a blank faceless head wearing something that looked like a matte black tiara. The voice continued.

"This camera rig will be bolted into your skulls and rigged to explode if tampered with. It will also explode if the electronic barrier surrounding the island is crossed. So bottom line, don't mess with them and don't try to leave the island."

Mahan snuck another glance at the woman to his left. She was still looking right at him, ignoring the screen. Her eyes were intense, impossible to look away from, but her expression was unreadable. He felt a nervous flutter in his belly as he realized how long it had been since he had been with a woman. Then he was hit with the sudden realization that she was probably going to die before the end of the show and he looked down, awash in conflicting emotion.

"There will be no food or water provided," the talking head continued. "You will receive shots to counter some effects of the local water and the most virulent of the indigenous parasites and diseases, but otherwise, you will receive no medical assistance of any kind. No interference from the outside world. You will be totally on your own, guys."

The screen flashed images of various tools, weapons and other equipment.

"There are a variety of useful items hidden randomly around the island, so keep your eyes peeled." The talking head was back, a phony serious look on its face. "The rules are simple. You must kill everyone else on the island. Everyone else will be trying to kill you. The last contestant alive on the island will be declared the winner."

Butch looked around again at his fellow contestants. Some were still viciously eye fucking him while others seemed utterly fixated on the screen.

"Oh, and one more thing." The talking head paused dramatically. "This season we have a special guest.

A black silhouette with a large red question mark where the face would be appeared on the screen.

"He will also be trying to kill all of you."

Another long, pregnant pause and then a flutter of movement caught Butch's eye. The Latina bikini girl host was putting on a gas mask. The guards and camera crew followed suit and a thin spike of panic slid up Butch's throat. He yanked fitfully at his manacles.

"Good luck to each and every one of you," the talking head said, giving a big smarmy thumbs up that faded slowly into the *Xtreme Elimination* logo.

There was a soft, barely audible hiss and a strange smell hit Butch, a sort of weird metallic artificial fruity scent, like some scratch and sniff thing made for kids. The panic blossomed wide inside him and he wrenched his wrists, skin tearing as black spangles began to fill his vision. As he went down, he thought of the green-eyed woman. He hoped she would not be hurt as she crumpled to the concrete, and that thought was followed swiftly by the grim reminder that the fall to the ground was the least of her worries. Or his.

NINE

Caleb Carson sat on the edge of an expensive padded leather desk chair in the dimly lit, heavily soundproofed room known as the *Xtreme Elimination* cockpit. Surrounded by screens and ten science fiction films worth of glittering high tech equipment, Caleb was jacked to the gills on adrenaline and Gerda's espresso. Caleb chewed his nails till they bled as he tried to watch all the screens at once.

They were going out live in less than ten minutes. Live. Just the word alone was enough to strike terror into the hearts of lesser showrunners. The decision to go live on the premiere episode of season two was risky but brilliant. Nothing the other networks could throw up against it would stand a chance. The allure of watching the action as it actually unfolded was far too great. There would be no taping or TIVO-ing this baby. The nation was dropping everything to be in front of the tube at precisely 8pm, Friday night, breathlessly awaiting the biggest event in television history. Nothing else mattered. This made the fucking Super Bowl seem like a rerun of *Malcolm in the Middle*. They ran all the prerecorded build up, all the interviews and back-story on all the contestants in the first hour.

It was nearly time to go live.

The contestants would be waking up, shaking off the effects of the sleep gas and getting oriented on the island. Of course, Jason would be waking up too. The number of variables and unknowns were enough to eat a hole the size of a compact disc in Caleb's stomach lining, but there was no denying the appeal of being in on the action as it happened. He had to make sure that some action actually happened as quickly as possible.

To that end, he had his crew place the sleeping Felice and T-Rex within fifteen feet of each other. Both girls were less than a quarter of a mile from Jason's current position.

Caleb fiercely hoped that the fight between the two hottest chicks on the island would attract the attention of Jason, starting off the season with a bang and a half. Caleb's eyes were riveted on the screen

showing a creepy grayscale night-vision view of the unconscious Felice. That's where he wanted to open.

"Alan," Caleb said, summoning his director from the far side of the cockpit. "Talk to me."

Alan Dane was Caleb's right-hand man on this new season, the man who had made history with several other hit live shows like *Where's My Boyfriend?* and *Caribbean Cat Spat*. He was a master of the live format who had started his career directing pro-wrestling pay-per-views and was a multimillionaire less than a year later when Cat Spat went to number one with a bullet. He had a predator's eye and seemed borderline psychic in his ability to predict where the action would erupt next.

"We fade up on Felice," Alan said. "Cut to T-rex stalking her then to Felice's POV as T-rex attacks."

Caleb nodded. He knew that first battle had to be gold, and he figured Felice didn't stand a chance. He probably wouldn't even have to use the zapper.

On the first season of *Xtreme Elimination*, they had learned a lot. One of the best ideas Caleb had come up with was a simple electrode built into the camera rigs. He called it the zapper, and if the preselected winner seemed to be having a tough fight, Caleb would let their opponent have it. That jolt of electricity to the temple was enough to disorient the contestant, make them lose their bearings, giving whoever Caleb wanted on top enough of an edge to turn the fight around.

The network had wanted more control over the outcome and while it wasn't foolproof, it was a tremendous improvement over the utterly random chaos of the first season. After everything Caleb had gone through to secure the Butcher, he wanted to be sure his dog made it into the final round against Val Randall. Of course, the fact that he would have to die in that last battle didn't bother Caleb in the slightest. It was perfect, a heroic sacrifice to the god of ratings. After all, you couldn't make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

"This is it, people," Caleb said.

"We're live in five." Alan held up an open hand. Caleb's stomach turned anxious somersaults and his palms began to sweat. T-Rex was

beginning to stir groggily and Felice groaned and rolled on her side, pushing leaf littered hair back from her semiconscious face.

"Four," Alan said, tucking his thumb into his palm so only the four fingers remained up.

Caleb picked up his empty espresso cup and put it back down. The paper rim was chewed ragged.

"Three," Alan said, dropping his pinkie finger.

Caleb found himself wishing he would have a heart attack and get it over with already. His ribcage felt several sizes too small.

"Two," Alan said, dropping another finger.

Jason's POV camera shuddered and he began to raise himself up on all fours slowly, looking down at the root-tangled ground beneath him. Caleb clenched his fists.

"One," Alan said, only his index finger remaining upright.

"Let's do it!" Caleb said.

"And we're live on fourteen," Alan said.

Camera fourteen was the view of Felice waking up. Her eyes glowed metallic, catlike and terrified in the charcoal night vision panorama. She froze, seeming to listen with her whole body.

"Cut to T-Rex POV," Alan said.

Caleb wanted to kiss T-Rex. Her POV shot was textbook perfect, framed like a born shooter: foliage in the lower left and upper right of the screen and Felice smack in the middle of the shot. Could have been a clip from an Eighties slasher film. Perfect. Felice looked incredible, even in the weird, surreal black and gray night vision. She looked like a million bucks, big tits heaving as she sucked shallow panicked breaths. Her nipples were poking nicely through her bikini top.

"Felice POV," Alan called, seeming to predict that Felice's eye was about to go the spot where T-Rex crouched seconds before T-Rex burst out of the brush.

"Yo, whassup?" T-Rex called.

Felice bolted. Caleb cheered.

"Back to T-Rex," Alan said.

The POV shot of Felice running away, staggering, stumbling and sobbing, was nothing less than pure gold. Caleb was glad he had

decided to go with Felice over Big Mo. Big Mo might have had more fight in her, but she couldn't beat the perfect, bouncing globes of Felice's juicy ass, chewing furiously at that thong as she ran for her life.

A harried looking runner in a headset stuck his head in the doorway. "Sixty-nine," he said and disappeared as quickly as he had come.

Caleb's eyes went wide. Sixty-nine share? SIXTY NINE? That was utterly unheard of for a reality show of any kind. Those were Super Bowl numbers. Un-fucking-heard of!

"Holy shit," Caleb said softly.

"Give me fifteen!" Alan said, utterly unruffled. Camera fifteen showed a nice two shot as T-Rex pounced on Felice from behind, clamping her famous teeth around Felice's pretty little ear and tearing it most of the way off.

Felice screamed and Caleb and Alan high-fived each other as she managed to kick free and take off again. Alan had fifteen zoom in for a dynamite shot of T-Rex, slathered in blackish blood and flashing her cannibal smile before letting out a primal howl and taking off after her fleeing prey.

"Felice," Alan said.

Caleb frowned at Alan's choice. Why did he cut to Felice's boring POV of dull jungle when they could be looking at T-Rex's view of her righteous ass? Then Caleb glanced over at Jason's POV and saw that Felice was headed right toward him.

"Alan," Caleb said. "Will you marry me?"

Alan smiled, the tiniest curl in the corner of his thin lips. "Here it is."

Felice spotted Jason as he stepped into her path, but was too slow to prevent herself from slamming directly into the immovable wall of his broad, filthy chest. Her POV shook and she screamed like a banshee.

"T-Rex," Alan said.

T-Rex blessed them with a perfect shot of Jason's machete bursting through the milky, flawless skin of Felice's lower back,

slightly to the right of her spine. A dark geyser of blood burst from the wound, splattering her pale ass and legs.

Felice's hands clawed reflexively at Jason's hockey mask. Blood gushed from her nose and mouth as her twitching feet were lifted off the ground. She began to slide downward as the blade of the machete traveled up through her body, snapping her ribs one by one as it moved toward her shoulder.

"Jason POV!" Alan called out.

"Awesome..." Caleb said, enthralled by Jason's POV shot of Felice's dying face, eyes rolled up to silvery whites and blood drooling from her slack lips.

Suddenly, Jason's POV looked up from the dying woman and his calm, level gaze fixed on the frozen, wide-eyed T-Rex.

"Fuck!" T-Rex said.

"Bleep it," Caleb said.

"Done," Alan replied, signaling a tech to his left. They were on the standard thirty second delay, so it was no problem to cover up T-Rex's profanity. The past few years had seen a total revolution in filthy language on TV and even the much reviled "cunt" had finally made it to prime time, but the born-agains were clinging to the F-word like a dog with a bone and it was the last thing that still could not be said. You could show a woman in a bikini being butchered on live television, but Lord knows you can't have people saying the F-word. Caleb smirked. God bless America.

T-Rex bolted and Alan stayed with Jason's POV. A tech beside Caleb had the *Xtreme Elimination* streaming website up, monitoring the traffic—looked like the JasonCam was the most popular choice among online viewers. Outstanding. Caleb could not help but congratulate himself on the decision to include Jason. He was a star, a sixty-nine share with a machete. Television gold.

Jason was closing in on T-Rex. They had the equivalent of the zapper rigged for Jason too, a bull killing dose of tranquilizer that could be remotely jammed into Jason's neck if he got out of line and started getting the jump on someone important like the Butcher or Val Randall. T-Rex was a great contestant, but Caleb saw no reason

to stop Jason from taking her out too. Two kills before the first commercial break. That was Caleb's kind of action.

As Jason caught up to T-Rex, his POV got a little messy and confusing so Alan cut back to fourteen and wound up with a nice two shot of the gory action. T-Rex fought like a pit bull bitch, biting large, gray chunks of dead flesh from Jason's arms and neck but there was no real question as to who would take this round. Jason held her by her pigtails and started sawing vigorously into her neck. Blood shot up like a glorious Las Vegas fountain as he ground the blade through the notches between her vertebrae until he finally severed her head. When T-Rex was ready for her close up, Alan switched back to JasonCam in time for a killer shot of her ragged neck stump as Jason peered into the raw cross-section like he was trying to divine the age of a fallen tree by counting rings,

"And that's commercial," Alan said, and the entire team erupted into spontaneous cheers.

"Fuckin A," Caleb said.

TEN

Butch woke slowly, feeling as if he was battling his way though layer after layer of stretchy, semitransparent gauze. Details of his surroundings came to him one by one, oddly out of context. First a smell: rich, wet and loamy with an undertone of sharp crushed greenery. Then, the lacy, spore-dotted underside of a graceful fern, inches from his face and backlit by a faint, silvery glow. Thick, impassive tree trunks frilled with huge, gaudy, fan-shaped fungi. Low-hanging cascades of pale, fleshy orchids. The sound of trickling water over smooth stones, the high-pitched whine of mosquitoes and the piping chorus of amorous tree frogs.

Cool, low-wattage lights clinging to the trees above like a new kind of high-tech orchid, barely enough to see by, casting creeping and suggestive shadows all around him. An impassive camera to his left, posed on a sturdy tripod inside a protective steel cage, watching him with its single dark, unblinking glass eye.

His hands went to his head, fingers following the flexible contours of the POV camera rig. He could feel the two sore, swollen places where the hateful apparatus had been bolted into the living bone of his skull. He shook his head and a hot band of pain squeezed his thudding temples. Bastards.

Through the pain, Butch caught a blur of movement out of the corner of his left eye. Instinctively, he ducked back and away, but not quickly enough to avoid a glancing blow from a fist-sized rock, wielded by the stone-faced Vietnamese kid. The blow jarred the camera rig, sending shooting pains along the contours of his skull. The kid was a southpaw, and swung so hard with that left that he overshot slightly, opening up his ribs. Butch gave him a stiff shin to the side of the body, spinning the kid down to his knees.

Without thinking, Butch followed up with a mule kick to the face. When the kid went down, Butch jumped on top of him, his knees on either side of the kid's hips. Butch let the kid have it with everything he had. He blasted the kid with machine gun fists, but the kid was squirming furiously, bucking and twisting like a snake so Butch was

only able to connect with three out of four blows. Butch slammed his fist into the rough, root buckled ground on either side of the kid's head twice in a row, tearing open his knuckles. He let out a frustrated grunt, pulling back to give the kid an elbow to the face. In his frustration, he threw too hard and overbalanced, the point of his elbow striking sharply against the rough ground. The kid wiggled free, scooting down and away through Butch's legs.

Butch turned, still half kneeling like a man proposing marriage. He was amazed to see that the kid had barely registered the last volley of punches. He had known the kid was going to be tough, but he had taken a beating that should have laid him out cold and shook it off like a soap opera bitch-slap. The kid's face was masked in blood, lip split open and eyes swollen and going swiftly purple, but he stood steady and solid, hands up and ready, not weaving or even breathing hard. His eyes were cold slits, locked on Butch like sniper scopes.

The kid threw a kick to Butch's head and missed by a millimeter. Butch stood and aimed for the kid's profile with a cannonball left to the temple that would have dropped a man twice his size. The kid merely staggered back slightly. Butch grabbed the kid, lacing his fingers around the back of his brushcut head, and introduced the kid's forehead to Butch's knee. Still hanging on to the kid's head, Butch grabbed the kid under the armpit for a swift hip toss. The kid's ass and legs sprawled out on the ground and his back was against Butch's belly as he locked him down in a rear naked choke. Butch leaned hard into the choke, pressing down with his full weight. His heart was pounding, adrenaline screaming in his veins. He pushed harder and then felt the swift, sudden tap of fingers against his forearm. Without even thinking, he immediately loosed the hold and let himself fall back onto his ass, utterly gassed and spent.

I won, he thought.

His mind was spinning as he sucked air and tried to slow his heart as he waited for the ref to come and take his hand. He even thought he heard the roar of the ecstatic crowd, but as he shook his head, the reality of the situation started to slowly dawn on him. That sound was not the crowd—it was the rush of blood in his temples. The ref

was not coming to raise his hand because there was no ref. This was *Xtreme Elimination*, not the AAFC, and that meant—

The kid punched Butch square in the Adam's apple.

The breathless agony of the blow eclipsed all of Butch's thoughts with bright, suffocating terror. He gasped, choking and gagging when the kid followed up with a flawless kick to the face. Butch felt the length of the kid's shin slam into his nose like a Louisville slugger knocking one out of the park as his nose shattered in a hot red explosion of blinding pain.

Before Butch could react, the kid was on him, blasting him with brutal lefts, three, five in a row. Butch was starting to lose count, and in a last ditch, desperate effort, he grabbed the kid's right arm, trying to pull it down between his legs for an arm bar. The kid wrenched his arm out of Butch's grasp easily so Butch rolled over and away, struggling to his unsteady feet, hands up over his face and drowning in a million kinds of pain, but trying to stay solid and focused. Then the kid kicked him in the balls.

Butch had no protective cup under the goofy shorts. Christ, he didn't even have any fucking underwear. The brutal kick floored him instantly, a wash of nauseous agony wiping away everything else. He dropped, fetal, to the dirt, arms covering his head as the kid rained down punches anywhere he could connect.

Butch was coiled in on himself, fighting for air, fighting with every ounce of will to pull himself together for one last shot. He could almost hear Ace's thick Armenian accent echoing through his aching skull. Just one more shot. One more shot.

The kid was screaming at him, saying something in Vietnamese with every blow. Suddenly the blows stopped.

"Butcher?" the kid said, spitting a thick, bloody wad on the dirt by Butch's knee. "More like dead meat."

Butch peered between his forearms and saw the kid turn away and reach for the rock, that fist-sized rock he had first used to blast Butch in the face back at the beginning of this fight, a million years ago, in another lifetime, it seemed. That was all it took.

In a heartbeat, Butch was standing and punching the half-turned kid in the face with a barrage of lightning-fast blows. Drawing on

reserves he never knew he had, he knocked the kid back again and again and then grabbed his head for another knee to the face. The kid slumped forward, against Butch's chest like a drunk, practically falling into an anaconda choke.

No more bullshit, no more games, the swift steady pressure as Butch pushed down with all his weight. He felt the distinct, organic snap of the kid's neck breaking resonating through every bone in his body. Not a real loud sound a sharp pop, like at the chiropractor, only crisper and sounding wet somehow, like a fresh carrot. Then Butch heard the dull thump of the rock falling from the kid's grip and he let go, letting him crumple to the dirt.

Butch looked down into the shock-white, dying face of his opponent. The kid was not going to be counted out. No ref was going to come in and stop the fight, no doctors would rush in and take the kid away on a stretcher. The kid was dying. Really dying, right here in front of Butch, as the impassive cameras recorded every horrible detail. And not dying, but murdered, with Butch's own two hands, and that knowledge made him sick to the core. He staggered away on shaking legs and vomited into a cluster of ferns. Butch was wracked with shuddering revulsion and nightmare flashbacks to the bloody wreck of the two women in the hotel room.

He remembered next to nothing of those two murders, but this was totally different. He knew what he was doing. Never mind that the guy was trying to kill him too. It sickened him and made him feel like an animal. He had always heard the cliché that killing got easier the more you did it, but this was so much worse. He wondered if he was going to be able to do it again. And again and again. He shook his head and wiped blood from his eyes. He didn't have a choice, did he? Not unless he wanted to die himself.

Making his way as silently as he could through the dense underbrush, and trying to ignore the pain and exhaustion beating his body, Butch suddenly froze. He listened. There was a strange sound, a soft, rhythmic scraping. Proceeding cautiously, he crept forward toward a faint halo of light that indicated the presence of another stationary camera. Peering through a screen of branches, he spotted the muscular girl with the green eyes.

She had her back to a pair of thick trees, eyes wide in the dim light as she rubbed the tip of a thick green branch back and forth across a rough chunk of stone, sharpening it to a wickedly sharp point.

Butch watched her, his heart tight in his chest. It would be pathetically easy to take that stick away from her and snap her neck, but even the thought of it brought back the nausea so strongly, he feared he would give himself away. Agreeing to participate in this game had been a terrible idea. Butch did not know what had really happened in that hotel room that night, but he knew in his heart that he was not a killer, in spite of that dead kid back in the clearing. He wanted more than anything to win, to have those fancy lawyers to help prove to Ace that he was innocent, but Butch didn't have it in him to kill to make it happen. He would have been better off put to sleep like an unwanted dog at the pound.

He was about to slink away when a sudden dull thunk shook him from his reverie. The girl let out a stifled gasp and threw herself down in the dirt. There was a huge machete embedded in the tree trunk scant inches above where her head had been only moments before. A huge grayish hand reached out from the dense jungle to reclaim the weapon. Clear, amber sap trickled down the massive blade as an enormous man in a hockey mask stepped out of the concealing brush.

He towered over her, hulking, silent and impassive. That emotionless hockey mask, splattered and smeared with fresh blood and gore, seemed almost to float, ghostly and disembodied in the silvery gloom. The girl let out a furious howl and jammed the sharpened stick into the man's leg, to the right of his groin. Butch cheered silently as she twisted and pulled up and the stick snapped. Thick, foul liquid trickled from the splintered end of the stick and the man staggered slightly, struggling to wrench the machete out of the tree.

When the machete was finally free, the masked man swung at the girl and she threw herself out of the way, landing hard. The man advanced on her as she crawled awkwardly backward through the damp leaf litter on the jungle floor. The splintered end of the stick protruding from the man's groin bumped against a low, rotten

stump, causing him to pause and look down at what, on any normal person, should have been an excruciating, if not life threatening injury. With less reaction than a man picking lint off his jacket, the masked man gripped the end of the stick and yanked it out in a wet black gush of some unwholesome fluid too thick and vile to be ordinary blood. What kind of creature was this masked monster? Clearly this was the "special guest" the video introduction had spoken of. But how the hell were they supposed to fight something that could not be killed or even hurt?

The girl must have been wondering the same thing as she used the brief distraction to scramble to her feet and grab a jagged stone nearly twice the size of the one the Vietnamese kid had used to blast Butch in the face. Butch was amazed that she could hold it in one hand. She cast a look at the advancing creep in the hockey mask and then turned to run.

The huge guy was amazingly fast. Butch sucked in an anxious breath as the masked man grabbed the girl by the back of her shirt and yanked her toward him. Butch let the breath out in a small stifled cheer as she hauled off and smashed the rock into the masked man's face. A thick crack split the dirty white hockey mask from the eyehole to the top left edge, but the guy seemed otherwise unfazed by the blow. He swung at her with the machete, but she was too close. She took a glancing blow to the temple with his thick wrist rather than the edge of the blade. It was still enough to knock her stupid. She crumpled and fell backward and to one side.

The masked man turned and stood over her, machete raised for a deathblow. Butch's heart was pounding as the blade came whistling down into the dirt beside her head. She barely rolled away in time. To Butch's amazement, she grabbed hold of the guy's machete-wielding arm, clinging to it with all her strength as he lifted her off the ground. She couldn't weigh less than a hundred and sixty-five pounds but he lifted her effortlessly with one arm like a dad roughhousing with his little kid. The guy reached across and squeezed her throat until her grip on his arm loosened. She scrabbled and clawed at the arm that held her by the throat but

Butch could see that she was tiring and the freak was raising that huge machete to cut her in half.

Butch knew that if that masked maniac killed the green-eyed girl, it would leave Butch one contestant closer to victory, but he could not bring himself to stand by and watch while she was murdered.

Adrenaline pushed Butch into sudden action. He ran at the masked man full speed and delivered a powerful kick to the guy's knees. The monster let go of the girl and staggered back. She fell directly on top of Butch, knocking him to the ground. Her head snapped forward and hit him squarely on the broken nose, blinding him with a jolt of bright agony. He cursed and she pushed up against him and rolled away. He then heard her yelp in surprise at the exact same moment as the masked man tripped and fell, plunging back and down through a tangle of branches and into a hidden ravine.

Butch got up on one knee and saw the girl hanging over the edge of the ravine, clinging to desperate fistfuls of strangler vines.

"Shit," Butch said, throwing himself flat on his belly and reaching out to her. "Grab my hand."

The girl looked up at him, her green eyes wide and wild. They could hear the masked man thrashing and hacking at the foliage down at the bottom of the ravine as he struggled to climb up after her.

"Come on!" Butch said.

The girl let go of the vines with one hand and gripped his outstretched hand. Her hand was thick and calloused, her grip like iron. He pulled slowly and she was able to get first one leg, then the other up over the lip of the ravine. He helped her to her feet.

"Run," he said.

She did as he said. They ran together, putting as much distance between themselves and the masked freak as possible. Butch struggled to concentrate on the dark jungle around them, keeping an ear out for any danger, but it was hard not to be distracted by the pull and flex of the girl's powerful legs and ass as she ran in front of him.

Finally, she stopped, winded and he drew up beside her, feeling every bruise, every blow resonating through his bones. She stood

with her arms tight across her chest, looking up at him through the wisps of dark hair that escaped her ridiculous pigtails, twining around the menacing shape of the camera rig. Before he realized he was going to do it, he reached out and touched her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fuck off," the girl said, flinching away from his touch. "I don't need your help."

She glared up at him, her chin strong and determined. Her eyes were blazing and he felt a totally useless and distracting wave of desire wash over him again. He struggled to mentally push it down and keep it down before it really got him into trouble.

"I'm sorry... I..."

"I said fuck off!" She shoved him and when he didn't budge, she hauled off and hit him in the shoulder with a surprisingly stiff left.

"Hey," he said raising his hand to his shoulder and frowning

"I don't need you," she said, taking another wild swing that would have jawed him if he hadn't grabbed her wrist. He held it tight, letting her fight and kick and flail. Christ, she was strong. His whole body was battered and sore from the previous beating, a hot, pulsing beat of pain in his broken nose, but he held fast until she went slack, exhausted.

"Okay, fine, you don't need me," he agreed. "So don't hit me anymore, all right? I think I've been hit enough for one day."

He let her go. She wrapped her arms around herself again and turned away. "What happened to you?" she asked quietly.

"I killed a man," he said. "A contestant. The Asian guy."

She squinted at him like she was sizing him up. "Right."

It sounded so strange to say it out loud, in simple words. "I killed a man." It was all so unreal. Already the sound of the kid's neck snapping, the look of his slack dead face, all the details were fading, replaced by ever thickening layers of exhaustion and pain. Plus there was that green-eyed girl, standing so close to him, shivering slightly in her preposterously skimpy outfit. His gaze was irresistibly drawn again to the high, flawlessly sculpted bubble of her exposed muscular ass in the tight thong and he forced himself to look away, cursing himself for reacting like a pathetic horny teenager.

But it wasn't the months in solitary confinement that made him go all moony over this beautiful Amazon; there was something about her. Something complex and fierce and intense. Before his arrest, Butch had been up to his eyeballs in beautiful women. Top-drawer models and actresses who got all juicy with bloodlust from watching him in the cage and asked him not to shower after the match. All it took to get a piece was not to push them away. He had been growing tired of these hungry pretty things that all wanted him to drive, wanted him to be "Daddy". Good girls that wanted to be bad and bad girls that wanted to be punished. Women that wanted to find a way in, to get under his armor and find the secret combination that would open up the door to his heart, to the ring and the dress and the house and the kids.

Butch had become so adept at keeping women at arm's length that he was starting to believe that he really was emotionally bulletproof. The only relationship he'd ever had that came close to breaking through was a three month fling with a cop named Gina. She was ten years older than him, an athletic tomboy, tough as nails and liked to be on top. But there was also a kind of exquisite vulnerability beneath her hardened self. She ground him down to a bleeding nub again and again and he could not get enough, but when he lay with her, he could feel his armor slipping. She was getting under his skin and that terrified him. He couldn't take opening himself up to the pain of loving someone and losing them again, so he broke it off with Gina, before things got out of hand. He still thought about her, after the soft, pretty ones fell asleep. This green-eyed girl reminded him of a younger, more volatile version of Gina.

And then there was the fact that this girl was a killer, a murderer, like him. He did not know the details of her crime, but it gave her a dangerous edge and simultaneously thrilled and disturbed him.

She turned back and looked into his eyes like she was trying to see through him. The frogs, silenced by the unnatural presence of that hideous masked monstrosity, began to cautiously pipe up again.

"Why did you save me?" she asked.

He looked away. "I don't know."

There was a long moment of awkward silence. Butch was aware of the greedy cameras recording every angle, every word.

"I want to get out of this jungle," she said. "Find someplace along the beach with rocks on three sides. It will be easier to defend."

"Okay," he said.

She frowned. "I didn't invite you."

"I know," he replied. "You don't need me."

She nodded and turned to go. She got less than ten feet when she paused. "Come on," she said without turning back.

He followed. What else was he going to do?

***

Alex did not look back to see if the Butcher was following her or not. She supposed he could jump her from behind and take her out if he wanted to, but she knew in her gut that he would not. After all, he had saved her from that freak in the hockey mask, hadn't he? Maybe she couldn't trust him completely, but she didn't need to watch him every second. Instead she concentrated on watching the dense jungle, scanning all around her for signs of an ambush.

Still, as hard as she tried, she could not put the Butcher out of her mind. She had seen him on AAFC. Everybody had. He was famous.

He was not handsome like Mark had been. His nose was crooked and mashed down, busted countless times in the past and clearly recently broken yet again. His dark eyes were narrow and guarded beneath his bruises. His big knuckles were torn and bloody, ridged with scar tissue and his build beneath the ridiculous Camp Isla Negra get-up was all business. None of that superfluous, showy musculature like the bodybuilders at Gold's. The Butcher was thick through the middle, sturdy and broad shouldered, solid as the steel bulldog on the hood of a Mack truck. He was a tough son of a bitch and he made Alex tense and antsy, like a dry drunk offered an ice-cold beer.

After the hell of withdrawal from all of Mark's drugs, Alex never felt any desire to "fall off the wagon". There were times, especially when she lay awake all night in her cell, that she wished for

something to quiet her mind and help her sleep, but the longing had no real teeth. In truth, that part of her life was as dead as he was and there was no going back. However, the prospect of having a strong man to take care of her again, to take away the burden of responsibly and tell her what was best, was terrifyingly seductive. She had sworn she would never depend on anyone again. Never let a man get under her skin. But, regardless of his motivations, the Butcher obviously wanted to help her.

It would be so easy to let him. He was so much stronger than she was. He had lived through a beating that clearly would have hospitalized a lesser man, plus he had saved her life and could do so again. And he wanted her. She could sense his eyes on her body. She could lead him on and use him to help her win, then go back to her newfound independence once the game was through. Just one little drink wouldn't do any harm, right...?

She knew that she could not allow herself to fall back into that kind of thinking. If she was going to win, it would be on her own terms, alone. And if she died trying, then so be it. She'd tell him to beat it as soon as they hit the coast.

The sound of the ocean was getting louder and minutes later she came to an abrupt end to the tangled jungle. Sharp, jagged rocks led down to a curl of smooth black sand. Lanky camera tripods dotted the beach but there were no humans that she could see. No footprints, no signs of life. Nothing but tiny white crabs, clumps of seaweed and the roiling, moonlit ocean.

"I don't like it," the Butcher said softly and she jumped a little. "Too exposed."

Alex nodded. She had been thinking the same thing.

"We follow the edge of the jungle until we reach that big rock formation." She indicated a guano encrusted pile of slick, black stone about five hundred yards down the beach. "Maybe there's a small cove or something. We could fish. Find things to store fresh water. Make them come to us and then pick them off one by one."

"Us?" Butch smiled, arching a scarred and swollen eyebrow.

Alex frowned and clenched her fists. She had planned to tell him to fuck off and go her own way.

"You're not gonna hit me again, are you?" he asked.

"I guess not," Alex said, flooded with contradictory emotions.

"It's a great plan," the Butcher said. "There's one problem."

"What?"

"Well," he said, squinting and looking away down the beach. "What do we do when it's you and me left?"

Alex looked up sharply. He would not meet her gaze. They did not speak or move for several seconds.

"Listen," she said finally. "I—"

"Do you see that?" The Butcher cut her off.

"What?"

He pointed out into the surf toward their left. She scanned the crashing waves and spotted several dark shapes bobbing in the water.

"Seals?" she asked.

"Navy SEALS, more like it," Butch replied, but his response was swallowed in a burst of noisy static from her POV camera headgear.

"Shit," she said, shaking her head.

"You too?" Butch asked. "What the hell is wrong with these damn things?"

"Look," she whispered. "I think you're right."

The dark things in the water were closer to the shore and as they raised themselves up out of the waves, their human forms became clear. Sleek, black clad frogmen, lugging boxes of esoteric and complex equipment up onto the deserted beach.

"Who are they?" Alex asked. "Are they some kind of technicians for the show?"

"I don't think so," Butch replied, "Whoever they are, I think they are jamming the signals from our POV cameras."

She looked back at Butch, wide-eyed.

"I have a feeling things are about to get interesting around here," he said.

ELEVEN

Caleb was furious, screaming into his headset. To say that he was apoplectic with rage would be the understatement of the century. This was totally unheard of. Unacceptable. He wanted a hundred techs out there yesterday. He wanted this dealt with. They were live for fuck sake. No safety net.

Everything was going like gangbusters when, out of nowhere, this major technical difficulty. They suddenly lost three stationary cameras along the northern tip of the island, and worse, they also lost two POV cameras. The Butcher and the bodybuilder. Luckily, the malfunctioning cameras were nowhere near the current hot action—a brutal hand-to-hand battle between the nurse, Danisha Scott, and the rapist, Billy Dean Whitcomb. Things were also starting to look mighty cozy between Mahan and Coyle. Carson was beginning to think they might actually have sex, an *Xtreme Elimination* first and huge ratings booster. Caleb even had the fuzz filters booted up and ready to block out POV views of any actual naughty bits. Again, Caleb couldn't help but snicker at the bizarre non-logic of American morality. Gaping belly wounds and severed heads, no problem, but we better not see a hint of pink. Still, regardless of the FCC restrictions, Caleb planned to blur the absolute bare minimum and serve it up hot, giving the people what they wanted and then some. Of course, that only worked if their goddamn POVs were online. It was critical that they be brought back up as soon as possible. If Mahan got Coyle's top off or something while they were offline, Caleb would have to commit sepuku.

Caleb's competitors, former partners and various girlfriends would all tell you that he was not a nice man, not by a long shot. But they would also have to admit that he was good at what he did. Earth shattering, apocalyptic disasters happened every five minutes in the topsy-turvy behind-the-scenes world of TV land. The job of a showrunner was to fix the unfixable, to handle the out-of-control and to make the impossible happen in under a minute. When everyone else was running around like burning chickens, Caleb put out the

fires. He was at his best with gun to his head, and as the tourniquet of stress tightened around his temples, he tossed back another handful of cherry flavored antacids, buckled down his fury and got to work.

He had the Isla Negra offshore tech crew on the satellite cellphone, working through the glitch while he continued to monitor the Scott/Whitcomb fight from the corner of his eye.

"Fuck you, you fat fuckin' nigger bitch!" Billy Dean screamed, clutching at a large flap of skin the big nurse had managed to tear from his scalp. "I'll cut your fucking tits off and make you eat 'em!"

"Caleb?" Alan called across the room. "Thoughts on 'nigger'? To bleep or not to bleep?"

Caleb covered the mouthpiece of the cellphone. "Everyone uses 'nigger' now. Leave "nigger', 'bitch and 'tits', and lose the F-words. Bare legal minimum, Alan, that's what *Xtreme Elimination* is all about." He uncovered the mouthpiece. "No, no. Not you."

Caleb hung up with the tech and eyed Jason's tracking blip on the big map of Isla Negra. He was distressingly close to the dead zone, but so far, his plain, dull view of moving jungle remained unaffected. Then, as inexplicably as they went down, the three dead cameras popped back up, restoring their panoramic views of the wild northern coast. Seconds later, Mahan and Coyle's POVs came back up. Caleb was ecstatic to see Mahan's eye line directly focused on Coyle's large nipples, where they poked provocatively through the thin, sweat-damp fabric of her Camp Isla Negra shirt.

Caleb was dreamily fantasizing about finding some way to assure that Val killed the girl bodybuilder so the fight between Val and Butch would be that much more intense when the unthinkable happened.

JasonCam fizzed out to static.

Caleb had the tech back on the line, ripping him eight new ones and cursing his lineage back to the dawn of time. The tech sounded close to tears. Caleb was halfway through booking a flight down to Costa Rica to personally kick some ass when, like the previous two POVS, Jason's camera popped back up again, showing the same dull, slow moving jungle scene.

"You got lucky," Caleb said into the satellite phone. "But if this happens one more time, I'm not gonna fire you, I'm gonna go dig up your mother and fuck her goddamn skeleton. I'll eat your fucking dog, you hear me. What the fuck do I pay you for? You keep my cameras running. Period."

"We got another kill," Alan said. "Punch up seven."

Caleb turned to the screen showing camera seven. Danisha Scott had bashed Billy Dean's head open on some jagged rocks. Blood and curds of brain splattered her face and glistened in her hair. She was wide-eyed and breathing hard, but she still seemed remarkably calm. She had some ugly gashes and a nasty bite mark on her fat upper arm.

"Hit the tally graphic," Caleb said.

A graphic appeared on the screen, listing the dead contestants. Billy Dean made four. Caleb sucked in a deep breath and ate some more antacids. They were almost to the end of the live broadcast. Everything else from that time forward would be divvied up into hour segments for the rest of the season, leading up to the big finale of Val versus the Butcher. Then, Caleb would sleep for a week.

He looked back at JasonCam. No real action there, but no news is good news. He could not afford to lose it again.

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"Are you sure he's out?" Sheldon Simon asked.

Roger Banner crouched over the slumped and unmoving form of Jason. He was reluctant to touch the rotten, stinking bulk, so he picked up a broken branch and poked the misshapen side of Jason's patchy, bald head like a little kid examining road kill.

"Looks like it," Banner replied.

"Well I ain't taking no chances," Simon said, pulling out a capped hypodermic and a rubber-stoppered bottle from a pouch on his belt.

Banner shrugged as Simon drew out a massive dose and slid the needle into Jason's carotid artery. "Go nuts," Banner said. "It's not like you're gonna kill him or anything."

Banner and Simon had worked for Dart for ten years and were close as brothers. Banner was a year younger and obnoxiously redheaded. He kept his flaming hair shaved down to nearly nothing, but even his eyebrows and lashes were the jaunty reddish-orange of a candied yam. Simon teased him about it mercilessly, especially after glimpsing Banner naked in Dart's expensive sauna.

"I don't see how a woman can take that shit seriously, dog," he would say, shaking his head at Banner's safety-orange pubes. "You'd be trying to get all intimate and romantic-like and all of a sudden it's like, 'Sproing! Hi, kids! I'm Bozo the Penis!"

"Didn't get any complaints from your wife last night," Banner replied serenely.

"Shit looks like a goddamn muppet."

"Maybe that's why she kept calling me 'Animal'." Simon, on the other hand, often liked to refer to himself as "Hitler's worst nightmare". Six foot four, blond, ripped to shreds and as handsome as a movie star, he could easily be mistaken for some Aryan genetic superman. In fact, he was Jewish, the son of a Rabbi, though you'd never know it from his quirky, pseudo-ghetto mannerisms. Banner often retaliated for the muppet jokes by implying that Simon's mother must have had something on the side with Dolph Lungren. He was also known to call Simon things like "Mixmaster Mashugana" or "Hebro". For all their teasing, they were a pair of tough bastards who had done years and years of Dart's dirty work. They had skills. There was little the two of them could not pull off.

While the two of them worked on binding and securing the unconscious Jason to a folding stretcher with thick medical restraints, the third frogman was peeling off his wetsuit and pulling dry clothing from one of the sealed packs. His name was Frank Tate, an enormous, burly bear of a guy nearly seven feet tall, with a rough, stubbly face and a shaved head. He did not smile at Banner's jokes. He had only been working for Dart for eight months, but was sick of being treated like the FNG. He had Gulf time and a decent body count and was a crackerjack diver, but whenever he was on a mission with Banner and Simon, he could not help feeling like the pesky little brother their mom had forced them to bring along to the movies. He

was not happy about his assignment either, but since he was the biggest guy on the team, there was really no arguing about it. He forced himself to dress quickly, slipping into the dirty, ragged work pants and shirt, the stained and bulky boots and lastly, the cracked and weathered hockey mask. He felt really strange, dressed like that, with the real Jason Voorhees lying unconscious at his feet.

"Looking good, Frankie," Simon said.

"Ooh, I'm scared," Banner said. .

"Shut up and give me the rig," Tate said

Banner handed him a POV camera rig. He pulled the feed from the unconscious Jason's camera and disengaged the remote pack. He handed the bundle of spaghetti to Frank. Tate's big fingers were surprisingly adept on the tiny mechanisms, untangling the wires and strapping it to his own rig.

"Ready?" Tate asked, turning away from his companions.

"Go," Simon said as he and Banner lifted the stretcher and headed back toward the beach.

Tate plugged the feed into his headset. It took several seconds before the scrambler Simon and Banner carried was far enough away for the signal to clear but when it did, Tate stood, facing a wall of greenery. Slowly, he began to walk.

TWELVE

The *USS Norfolk* was a Seawolf class attack submarine, which had supposedly been totaled during a training mission, but was actually stripped of weapons and secretly sold to Dart for an ungodly sum. Simon and Banner were standing onboard, watching behind thick glass while the docs took over. It hadn't been easy for the two of them, lugging all the equipment through the rough water along with the unconscious Jason. They teased Tate and treated him like a freshman but they did miss his confident and quiet strength.

The surf had been fierce, the currents swift and ruthless. Many curious small and not so small fish had swarmed around them, darting in to take bites from the huge rotting hunk of bait webbed into to the stretcher between them as they swam. Banner couldn't help but imagine the rich, chummy stink of Jason's rotting flesh drifting through the black water, attracting the attention of the schooling hammerheads known to cruise the region. Night dives were always creepy no matter how many times he did them. The feeling of a hundred hungry things lurking beyond the range of your pathetic little light was stronger than ever. Banner had never been afraid of the dark on land, not even as a kid, but the pitch-black ocean was the dark on steroids. A vast, cold and crushing blackness filled with monsters. Not to mention the captive monster they carried between them. He had never been so relieved to see the shimmering circle of light beneath the dark bulk of the *Norfolk*.

The docs, two guys and a geeky blonde lady were as happy as kids with a new puppy, swarming excitedly over Jason, and directing Simon and Banner to place him on a rolling stretcher and wheel him over to the airlock of the clean room that had been set up specifically for this mission.

Banner and Simon were planning to go get themselves some coffee, to warm up and forget all this nonsense about killers who didn't die and viruses and immortality, but they found themselves mesmerized by the view through the thick window into the stark white clean room, the high tech lab that housed their special cargo.

Dr Cain's pet virus didn't look like much. Just a small glass container, like a high-tech jelly jar, plastered with biohazard stickers and encased in a heavy Plexiglas box with two pairs of black rubber gloves protruding from holes on either side like some kind of weird fun house display. The docs all geared up in their creepy white space suits and went to work, pushing Jason in to the center of the lab.

Above their heads a flat screen showed a stunning close up of that foxy Dr Cain, sleek dark hair pulled back in a stern bun and looking as calm and steely as ever. She was so ridiculously hot and her bitchy demeanor seemed to make her that much sexier. Banner couldn't hear what she was saying, but he could tell she was ordering the three lesser doctors around like maids. He couldn't help but imagine how it would be to have her order him around like a maid.

Banner shifted from foot to foot and tried to stay focused on that pleasant fantasy, rather than looking too closely at what the white coats were doing to Jason with scalpels and needles. Unfortunately, it was impossible. It was all so horribly fascinating. The doctors unscrewed the camera rig and unhooked the tranquilizer collar, planting a subcutaneous tracking device into his neck below the left ear, but when they went to remove the cracked hockey mask, morbid curiosity got the better of Banner and he had to see what lay beneath.

Jason's face, when it was finally revealed, was appallingly wrong, profoundly misshapen, covered with weird, asymmetrical knots of bone and thick, puckered scar tissue. Thin, brittle wisps of colorless hair dotted the patchy scalp. The slick, grayish skin reminded Banner of a dirty wad of chewing gum. Some rift, like a crooked cleft palate, pulled the blackened lips up and to the left, revealing teeth like broken tombstones. One eye was nothing but a yawning socket filled with dry, withered strands that looked like the chewed end of one of those disgusting Bully Sticks that Banner's wife was always buying for their Mastiff, Lulubelle. The other was mercifully closed and whatever passed for consciousness inside that unnatural killer remained hidden beneath the ragged, crusty lid.

Banner still could not bring himself to look away as one of the doctors sliced carefully into the rotten, patchy skin of Jason's scalp and began to peel down the flesh covering his lumpy head until it

flopped down over his deformed face like a cheap Halloween mask. Using a bulky electric bone saw to remove the top of Jason's skull, the doctor revealed the bruise-black and gelid contours of Jason's brain.

Dr Cain smiled on the video screen and directed her space-suited minion to insert a preposterously long needle into the exposed brain. Banner finally had to turn and look away as thick, clotted, pus-like yellow ichors were drawn up into the barrel of the hypodermic.

"Christ," he said softly.

"You think this fucked up crazy shit is gonna work?" Simon asked. "Make people live forever?"

Banner shook his head, watching the doctor inject the fluid into a vial and slip the vial into some sort of complicated machine.

"Nah," he said. "That Dr Cain is a hammer, I'll give her that, but truth be told, she's as nutty as Dart."

Simon shrugged. "It's a paycheck."

The doctors were doing boring doctor shit, peering into microscopes and sucking stuff up into needles and squirting it into other vials. The lady doctor had crudely clamped the top of Jason's skull back on, but had left the loose skin hanging down over his face to go over and attend to a flashing machine. One guy had his hands in the black gloves attached to the virus box but from his angle, Banner couldn't really tell what he was doing. It looked like he was splicing the stuff from Jason's brain into Dr Cain's virus.

"So, how about that coffee?" Simon asked.

Suddenly, Jason tore free from the restraints, grabbed a scalpel and slashed through the white space suit of the doctor closest to him, staining the sterile fabric with spreading crimson. The hanging skin flapped grotesquely as he tossed his head back like a long-haired musician tossing sweaty locks from his face. He pulled the terrified doctor close, jamming the scalpel through the man's hood below the faceplate. The scalpel slid easily through the soft skin under the doctor's chin, the faceplate obscured by a violent spray of blood, Banner thought he saw the scalpel blade shining inside the doctor's wide, screaming mouth. Jason left the scalpel buried in the doctor's throat and pushed him away, then grabbed the electric bone saw and

used it to smash thorough the glass face plate of the lady doctor to his right. She screamed and shuddered as the whirring bone saw chewed through her nose and eye, traveling through her skull and puréeing her frontal lobes.

The doctor with his hands in the gloves struggled to pull free and run, but he was too slow. Jason grabbed him from behind, tore off the hood of the doctor's protective suit and smashed his bare head into the virus box with such force that the thick Plexiglas shattered violently.

"Holy shit!" Banner said.

"I ain't going in there," Simon said, eyes huge. "That shit's contaminated."

Something was happening to Jason. Dark blood was welling up from every pore, flowing down his cheeks like tears. Blood dripped from his fingertips and down over the doctor's head.

A gruff klaxon sounded through the narrow corridors of the ship. Two of the sub's crewmembers came barreling in, guns drawn. "What the hell is going on here?"

Banner tried to regain some level of control over the rapidly escalating nightmare. "Tell the captain we've got a situation."

"A situation?" The larger of the two crewmembers took one look at the carnage through the glass and made for the airlock door.

"No!" Simon and Banner both shouted simultaneously.

"That crazy fucker is killing them," the younger man said, looking close to freaking the fuck out. "He's killing them!"

Banner grabbed the younger man's arm. "Look," Banner said, struggling to remain calm. "This is a biohazard situation. Do you understand?"

The young man paled, eyes huge.

"Oh my God," the larger man said. "We need to get the fuck out of here, now," Simon said.

"But what about them?"

Banner turned to the window in time to see Jason swing the female doctor's corpse by her heels, smashing her pulpy head full force into the window.

The four men jumped back, startled, as blood and brains splattered across the glass. Jason swung the woman's loose, rag doll body again, and silvery spider web cracks began to appear in the glass.

"Look," Simon said. "That guy isn't dead."

They watched with horror as the doctor, whose head had smashed into the box housing the virus, began to struggle slowly to his feet like a woozy drunk. His face was masked in blood, eyes studded with shattered glass, bulging crazily from their sockets. Before they could register what was happening, he had let out a furious screech and flung himself across the room. He hit the glass with full force and it blew outward, raining bloody shards all around them. Wickedly strong hands grabbed at Banner, trying to yank him through the broken window. He heard a deafening gunshot inches from his face and then a needle-sharp spray of ice-cold brine drenched them all like a fire sprinkler. A hideous thought gripped Banner with a fear so profound that the bloody madness around him was forgotten: they were on a fucking submarine.

More and more water was pouring in as the panicked crew fired their guns, tearing bigger holes in the metal walls. Screaming claustrophobic terror immobilized Banner as he pressed himself into a corner behind a thick pipe that shuddered and vibrated hard enough to rattle his teeth. The other doctor was up now and seemingly enraged, bent on getting at the crew members at all costs. His mortal wounds had no visible effect on him and the bullets were doing far more damage to the ship than to the two suddenly psychotic and seemingly invulnerable doctors. The lady doctor, on the other hand, lay still and unmoving, her liquefied brains seeping onto the white tile floor.

The doctor with the scalpel in his throat had pounced on Simon and seemed to be biting him through the broken faceplate, tearing bleeding chunks from his face and neck. His agonized screams made Banner want to cover his ears like when he was a kid and his parents used to fight late at night. He wanted nothing more than to sink into a tight ball, cover his head and insist that this wasn't happening. This could not be happening. Blood slick hands were grabbing at him,

wrenching at his clothing and pulling his limbs in several directions as the icy water rose higher and higher around them. Banner's last thought before Jason's bone saw ground his solar plexus to dust and shredded his panicked heart was that at least he wouldn't drown.

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Jason stood still at the center of the chaos inside the torn and failing submarine. The frigid salt water closed over his head, but he did not panic and flail like those around him. They fought like drowning rats, crawling on top of each other in their desperation and screaming like howler monkeys. As a sharp underwater rock formation peeled back the skin of the sub like a cheap tin can, Jason made his slow and careful way toward the gaping hole in the hull. Many objects floated past him as he moved. Shattered equipment. A brace of dead white mice. A plastic tray. A hypodermic needle. A severed arm. Only one floating object actually caught his attention. A familiar object bumping gently against the buckled ceiling and trailing its stained leather straps.

The hockey mask.

Jason reached out through the murky water and grabbed one of the straps. He carefully smoothed back the flap of loose, floating skin over his exposed skull and buckled the mask down tight.

It was a short walk back to the island. He did not notice that he was being followed.

THIRTEEN

Caleb stared at the screen showing the JasonCam. He was terrified to look away from it for a single second, in case the footage might be lost again. As if he could keep it up and running by concentrating so hard that his eyes began to bleed. They were almost to the end of the live portion of the show. Just one more hour, one more hour. He was not even remotely religious, and never had been, but he found himself offering up this desperate prayer to the god of ratings. Please, one more hour.

There was a lull in the action. The Mexican drug runner Beto Nuñez had caught and killed some kind of snake and was drinking its blood. Not that exciting, but still not bad. Danisha Scott, on the other hand, was doing something that proved to be so amazing and gruesome that Caleb could not believe what he was seeing. Alan had zoomed in on her gaping leg wound as she captured leaf-cutter ant soldiers by tricking them into clamping their huge mandibles down on a stick. She grabbed the ants behind their thick little pit bull heads to make them let go of the stick and then, to Caleb's horror and amazement, allowed them to bite down on the edges of the wound and snapped their heads off, leaving a row of shiny black heads like sutures, holding the wound closed.

"Henrow," Alan said suddenly.

Caleb was surprised that he had cut away from the ant thing, but he trusted Alan implicitly, and when he looked at AK Henrow's POV he saw a brown hand holding a screwdriver.

"Okay," Caleb said. "Somebody finally found something useful."

"Eleven," Alan said.

Camera eleven showed a shot of the handsome Henrow crouched low, listening, screwdriver clenched in his fist. In a flash, he was shimmying up a tree trunk and out of camera range.

"Back to Henrow," Alan called.

Caleb looked at the map, wondering who Henrow had heard coming his way. The closest blip belonged to Jason. Caleb frowned, puzzled.

"You've got to be kidding me," Caleb said. "Is he crazy or plain stupid? He's going after Jason with a screwdriver?"

"Looks that way," Alan said as Jason slowly came into view on Henrow's POV.

Jason was walking slowly, oblivious to the hidden ambush from above. Seconds later Henrow swung down from his sturdy branch and drove the screwdriver into Jason's throat in a blinding blur, again and again. Blood fountained upward as Jason swung his arm wide and managed to knock Henrow from his perch in the tree, sending him sprawling across the ground.

What happened next made losing the cameras seem like a walk in the park. Instead of pouncing on the foolhardy Henrow, Jason staggered, raised a hand to his gushing throat and then collapsed.

"Get up, you fuck!" Caleb screamed, leaping to his feet and clenching his fists.

"Go to commercial!" Alan called.

"Get up!" Caleb repeated.

Jason did not get up. He lay gasping and gurgling, then shuddered and went still.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Caleb shouted. "You cannot be dead, you son of a bitch!"

Henrow crept up to the fallen Jason. "You ain't so tough now?" he said quietly. "Mystery guest, my ass."

He bent and picked up the machete, looking the nicked and massive blade over before tucking it into his waistband. Then, as if on a whim, he reached across the huge, still body and pulled off the hockey mask.

Beneath was the utterly normal, roughly unshaven, but otherwise unremarkable face of a dead man. Not Jason.

For a long, ticking minute, Caleb experienced something he had never felt in his three years of show running. He was utterly and completely flabbergasted. He could not even come close to making sense of what he was seeing and had absolutely no idea whatsoever how to react. It was as if his problem solving skills had been suddenly short-circuited, leaving him with his mouth hanging open like a rubbernecker gawking at a fatal accident on the freeway.

"Boss," Alan said softly. "How do you want to handle this?"

Caleb turned to Alan like he had grown a second head and started quoting Shakespeare.

"Go back to Mahan and Coyle after the break," Caleb heard himself say. "Anywhere there's action. We need to think in terms of distraction."

"Got it," Alan replied.

"Gerda," he said into his cellphone. "Get me to San José, and I mean yesterday. We got a major problem."

"Yes, sir," Gerda said.

The crew in the *Xtreme Elimination* cockpit stared at Caleb as if he had somehow caused this impossible turn of events.

"Look, we can roll with this," Caleb said, already slipping his arm into the sleeve of his jacket and struggling to regain something resembling control. "Stay with the action and stay frosty. We only need to survive another hour and then it's cliffhanger city and the rest is all fixable in post. Got it?"

"Got it," Alan said. "Go, we're fine here. No problem."

"Right," Caleb said, desperately wanting to believe and failing miserably. "I'm gonna go find our wayward talent."

FOURTEEN

"Tell me your name," Butch said, watching the green-eyed girl scoop water from a thin trickle at the jungle's edge, drinking delicately from her big cupped hands.

"Alex," she said, looking away down the beach and running her wet hands over her face and through her hair, pulling out the ridiculous schoolgirl braids with her fingers.

"I'm Butch," he replied. "Butch Mahan."

"The Butcher." She nodded. "I know. I saw you beat Aurélio Lupi last year."

"Just Butch, okay?"

"Okay," she said. "Butch."

More awkward silence. Crashing waves. Wind. The moon was huge and low, shrouded by rags of thin, silvery cloud. Butch found himself thinking of how long it had been since he had been free, breathing fresh ocean air. It seemed so strange to be outside at night.

Alex turned back to look at him through her damp hair. Butch wanted to brush the hair back from her face but he couldn't make his numb fingers move and she probably would have hit him again anyway.

"So what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" he finally said.

She snorted, a sort of swallowed half laugh. "Same as you. Surviving."

She turned her broad, sculpted back on him, and started heading down the beach again, edgy and anxious, green eyes wide and watchful. She was beautiful.

"I guess that's my version of cliché jail house chit chat," he said. "Y'know, the old 'What are you in for?' routine."

She had been walking fast, forcing him to trot to keep up with her, but when he said that she paused and crossed her arms over her breasts.

"I killed my boyfriend," she said, looking out over the water. "Beat the son of a bitch to death with my bare hands." She turned back to

him. "Still wanna fuck me?"

His eyes went wide. "Jesus," he said softly.

"Look," she said, gesturing with her head. "We're almost there."

The rock formation was a good idea. It was almost like a tiny fortress, three sheer sides cupping a handful of smooth sand and only one way in. The tide was rising rapidly and soon the path leading in to the cove would be underwater. They could hole up there until the sun came up. And then...

Best not to think too far into the future. Best to stay alive. Keep her alive. That was all he could do.

"There has to be some way off this damn island," Alex said, sitting down on a smooth worn rock.

"You mean other than by killing me, I assume?" Butch replied.

Alex frowned. The water lapped gently at the rock and the moon threw a long melted silver streak across the waves. It was preposterously beautiful and serene, like a romantic postcard. Isla Negra is for lovers. Too strange.

She was pushing the sand with her booted toe when she uncovered a scrap of plastic.

"What is it?" Butch asked as she bent and started digging with her hands.

"I don't know," she replied, pulling up a heavy black object wrapped in plastic. She tore into the plastic and revealed the surprisingly mundane nature of the mysterious object.

"It's a frying pan," Alex said, holding it up.

Butch could not help but notice the way the muscles in her arm flexed as she hefted the big, cast iron skillet. He looked away.

"Great," he said. "We'll fry up some soft shell crabs for breakfast."

"Look," she said. "Us being together like this, it's a temporary thing. Once the sun comes up, I go my own way."

"I know, I know," he said. "But why are you so determined to get away from me, Alex? We can help each other. Fight together. Find a way off this island."

"No," she said.

He frowned. "What do you mean no? No, we can't fight together, or no, we can't find a way off this island?"

"Both," she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Why not let you help me?" she asked. "Why not? I'll tell you why not. Because I want you to, that's why not." She set the frying pan down on the rock beside her. "You take the first watch. I'm gonna get some rest."

She curled up on a dry patch of sand, facing away from him. He turned away and looked out over the water. He had absolutely no idea what to make of what she had said. She wanted him to help her, but didn't want to? She was a puzzle, a tangle of contradictions. He did not know if he was really going to be able to walk away from her in the morning. He tried to find a way to put her out of his mind, but he couldn't stand the thought of anything bad happening to her.

Before he could dwell too deeply on this and too many other complex issues, he felt an ice-cold, slimy hand reach up out of the water and clutch at his ankle, tugging down his sock. He made a guttural noise of surprise and staggered back, nearly slipping on the algae coated rocks.

"What the—?"

There was a man, rising up out of the water in a torn, bloody hazmat suit with a smashed faceplate and wide, gory gashes showing ragged white flesh beneath. His impossibly wide eyes bugged out huge and round as if pushed from within by some intolerable pressure. Behind him rose another white clad man, and another in a simple torn navy blue uniform baring no insignia. Blood leaked from their bulging eyes like tears. The one who had grabbed Butch's leg hissed furiously, its gaping maw flashing with some silver thing like hidden treasure.

"Alex," Butch called. "We got company."

"Holy shit!" Alex leapt to her feet and grabbed the frying pan.

"Who are you?" Butch asked. "What do you want?"

The man with the flashing silver object inside his mouth made another grab for Butch, but he kicked him back.

"There's something wrong with them," Alex said. "Look at their faces. They're all fucked up."

"What the fuck were they doing under the water?" Butch asked. "How were they breathing?"

The man leapt at Butch. Butch grabbed his wrists, spread them wide apart and, leaning back, struggled to keep the snapping teeth away from his face. With all his strength, he hurled the crazed man back into the water.

At that point, the second white clad man had reached the little cove and was scrabbling over the rocks toward Alex.

"Oh, hell no," she said.

She raised the heavy skillet like an axe and brought it down on her attacker's head. The left side of the man's face caved in, forehead shattered and eye knocked loose from its socket, dangling loosely on the smashed cheekbone. The man staggered a little, disoriented for a moment, and then fixed on Alex again and lunged for her thick legs. She dodged and slammed him in the head again with the frying pan, knocking him down.

"I don't understand," Alex said. "They're like that freak in the hockey mask!"

"Fuck!" Butch replied, kicking the uniformed man back into the water. "We need to get the hell out of here."

They started backing up, but were trapped by the wall of rock behind them.

"Climb!" Butch shouted.

Alex reluctantly dropped the frying pan and began to climb. The rock was jagged and rough, tearing into their hands and knees as they scrambled up and away from the reaching hands. The drowned men started up after them, fearless in their desperate fury.

"Shit," Butch said as the rock grew steeper and steeper. "I don't think we can make it."

The stone wall above them was beginning to curve back toward them, hopelessly impassible, and the drowned men were clutching at their boots and hissing with wordless hatred.

"We have to jump," Alex cried.

"You're crazy," Butch said.

She did not reply. Instead, she pushed off the rock and jumped over the heads of the drowned men, dropping back to the sand

behind them. Butch quickly followed suit and landed hard beside her. They ran out into the water and around the edge of the cove, making for the beach.

For the second time in one night, Butch found himself running for his life behind Alex, tearing through the jungle with his heart in his throat, screaming inside and close to collapse, but he had to keep going, he had to make it. They had to make it.

Eventually they found themselves in a small, quiet triangular clearing bordered by three massive trees.

"I think we lost them," Butch said, eyes wide in the near total darkness, listening with his whole body for the sound of pursuit.

He did not have time to catch his breath before the last thing on earth that he expected to happen, happened. Alex kissed him. This was no chaste peck on the cheek either, she grabbed him and pressed him hard against the rough bark of a massive tree, kissing him like it was the end of the world. His lips were torn and sore, his jaw aching from the beating he had taken and nose pulsing like a bad tooth, but his body responded instantly to her aggressive passion, bitch-slapping his brain into the back seat as he pulled her tighter against him and cupped her solid, muscular ass. She ground herself hungrily against him and they pushed and pulled at their restrictive clothing in a mad frenzy to get at each other. He tore her flimsy T-shirt and pushed down the damp thong while she fought with the button fly of his cut-off shorts until they fell away in a crumpled heap around his ankles.

He was totally overwhelmed with what had to be the single most fiercely erotic, utterly primitive sexual need he had ever felt. She was clawing at him, sinking her teeth into his shoulder and everything else: the cameras, the game, the drowned men in the white suits; everything was swallowed up by this need to be inside her immediately. She wrapped her huge, brutal thighs so tightly around him that he could barely breathe as he lifted her off her feet and thrust deep inside her again and again until he felt the powerful tremors of his shuddering orgasm traveling through her tense body, muscles inside her gripping him tight like a fist and he could hold back no longer.

She staggered back and away, struggling to reassemble her torn and disheveled clothing, knotting her T-shirt back together and blushing thickly.

"That wasn't about anything," she said.

He nodded. "Right," he said, awkwardly tucking himself back into the uncomfortable shorts.

She was lying. He knew she was because he could feel it too, this profound, animal connection that refused to go away now that they were physically satiated. Butch had no more idea what to do about this undeniable connection than he did about the inexplicable appearance of what, for lack of a better word, appeared to be some sort of zombies. He didn't want to fight anymore. He didn't want to think anymore. He wanted to take this strange, feral girl in his arms and forget everything else. It was totally baffling to him how a woman he barely knew had slipped so effortlessly through his expert emotional submission defense. It was useless to keep fighting, but he could not bring himself to tap out and admit the truth, so instead he started looking around for his shirt.

FIFTEEN

AK Henrow was searching the pockets of the dirty pants worn by the so-called special guest. Only the machete, but that was more than enough. This dumb-ass game was turning out to be real kindergarten shit. A cakewalk. If this big, dumb fuck in a goofy Halloween costume was the best they could do, Henrow had this game in his pocket.

He had been psyching himself up all day, wrestling the fear and the doubt, and since he was on this island, he'd felt nothing but a kind of hot excitement. Killing really was like riding a bicycle. It was going to be easy pickin's.

He thought he heard something, some stealthy crackle of leaves. He cocked his head, switching the machete to his good right hand. When another huge guy in a hockey mask appeared in the clearing, Henrow rolled his eyes. "Another one?" He spat on the ground. "Ain't you guys a bit old to be letting your mama dress you alike?"

Jason Voorhees cocked his head as if trying to fathom Henrow's words.

"You want some of what I gave your late brother over here?" Henrow asked. "Come and get it, motherfucker."

Jason took a step forward. Henrow ran at him, raising the machete and bringing it down into the masked killer's forehead.

The machete shattered the white hockey mask and stuck firmly in the bony curve of the man's skull. The pieces of the mask fell to the ground and Henrow backed away, his eyes wide in disbelieving terror.

This was no ordinary man. The face revealed beneath the shattered mask was hideously deformed, rotten and twisted with a ragged scar. Dark, unhealthy blood seemed to ooze from every pore, drooling from his twisted lips and falling like tears from his single good eye. Worse, the machete planted in his head seemed to have no effect whatsoever. He reached up and yanked it free, releasing a sluggish trickle of gray ooze that coated the blade. Jason's single eye burned with toxic fury.

Henrow wanted to scream, to run, to put as much mileage as possible between him and that impossible monster, but he was frozen, paralyzed with terror as the machete came down like the end of the world. His last thought was a kind of nauseous shame. Shame that he had fought harder, that he'd disgraced his set, that he'd lost. He had lost. It was over. As the huge blade bisected his nose and lips, filling up his world with unendurable pain, something happened to Henrow. He felt a weird, skittering feeling like ants crawling over the surface of his brain and his limbs shook, wracked with seizures so brutal, he felt as if his spine would snap. The shame, the pain, everything was suddenly swallowed up by the most intense raw anger, bloody and mindless and underscored by an almost maddening kind of hunger.

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Jason pulled the machete free from the young man's face and watched curiously as he wrenched and flailed in the dirt. Henrow's body then leapt to its feet, eyes expanding dramatically in their sockets like bloody bread dough. The bloated, bleeding eyes fixed on Jason, holding his gaze for a split second, and then, almost as if he recognized some kind of fundamental commonality, the man did not attack. Instead he turned and tore off through the brush. Jason did not contemplate the meaning of this exchange any more than he had considered the apparent resurrection of the doctors on the submarine. Instead, he knelt down and took the whole and unharmed mask from the ground beside the other. He put the mask on, hefted the bloody machete and headed away into the jungle.

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"...And that's credits," Alan said.

For the first time in his career, he was actually nervous. He was sweating, thick salty drops running down from his thinning hairline to sting his eyes and blur his vision. He did not even know what to make of what he had seen, but they could not have asked for a better cliffhanger. The website was receiving thousands of hits, chat rooms

exploding with speculation. The appearance of the white suited undead, then the apparent reanimation of Henrow. Was it real? Some kind of elaborate hoax? *Xtreme Elimination* could not have paid for such publicity, but something about what he had just witnessed made Alan's blood run cold. It looked to him as if that banger had been as good as dead. Stone dead, machete-in-the-face, deader-than-dog-shit dead. How could he have got back up like that? And his eyes, his awful, bulging, manic eyes had disturbed Alan so deeply that he was overwhelmed with a sudden urge to walk out of the cockpit and never look back.

Instead, he called Caleb. "Boss," Alan said. "You want the good news or the bad news?"

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"So," Butch said, watching Alex as she adjusted her shirt again, attempting to cover herself with the shreds of bloody fabric. "Have you got a plan?"

She looked back at him. "No."

"They have to stop the game," Butch said. "Something's wrong.

"What makes you think it's not all part of the game?" Alex asked. "Remember they said there would be no outside help no matter what."

"Yeah, but those frogmen," Butch said. "They weren't part of the game, I'm sure of it."

"What do you think was wrong with the people in the white suits?" Alex asked. "It's like whatever is wrong with the guy in the hockey mask is wrong with them too."

"I don't know," Butch said.

"Listen," she said. "Thanks for helping me. Saving me. Everything. I mean, that's not why I fucked you, I just..." She looked away, shy and anxious. "We could die. I never really believed it before, but I do now."

She paused again and he could see how hard this was for her, so he said nothing.

"I really want you to protect me," she said. "To make decisions and be strong and tough so I don't have to, but I can't let that happen. I made myself a promise that I would never let that happen again."

The passionate determination in her jaw and her narrow green eyes made her so fiercely beautiful it hurt Butch to look at her.

"But Alex," Butch said. "Everything else aside, you gotta understand that I'm no hero. I don't want to help you, to save you and protect you like some macho knight in shinning armor. Don't you see? I need you to help me. I can't do this alone. We have to help each other or neither one of us gonna make it."

She looked at him like she was trying to determine if he was pulling her leg or scamming her somehow.

"Without you, I'd be dead. Or else I'd still be skulking around the jungle getting eaten alive by chiggers and waiting to be ambushed by that scary hillbilly broad or something."

"I mean look at you," Butch continued. "You're no damsel in distress. You've got a hell of a stiff left. You could probably kick my ass with the shape I'm in right now."

"Do you hear something?" Alex asked, cocking her head.

Butch listened and heard a faint rustling and a kind of thick wet noise that sounded like someone eating

"I don't like it," Butch said.

"I can't believe I dropped the stupid frying pan," Alex said. "It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing."

"Shit," Butch said. "Just keep quiet and move real slow. We'll see if we can check it out."

They slipped as silently as possible through the tangled jungle, until they spotted the dim light, which indicated the presence of another camera. A few steps closer and they were able to see someone hunkered down beside the camera.

"Who is that?" Alex whispered. "He's one of the contestants, isn't he?"

It was that buff black guy with the headband. He had his back to them, crouched over something in the thick underbrush. He turned instantly to the sound of Alex's voice, hissing, blood drooling from his chin. His nose and upper lip were hideously split open, making

his face look like some kind of wet red vagina. His eyes bulged obscenely from their sockets like the men who had come out of the water.

"Shit," Butch said, but that was all he had time to say before the guy charged at them.

Seconds later, a big ugly white woman, who was on the ground, struggled to her fat, scabby knees. Slick organs spilled from her torn open belly, and huge wide eyes leaked blood. She stood and stumbled toward them too. Butch and Alex ran.

Tearing desperately through the vines and branches, body scraped and clawed by thorny creepers, and the ragged breath of the insane contestants inches behind him, Butch was terrified. What the fuck was happening? How could that woman be alive? Whatever had happened to the guys in the white suits had also happened to them and that meant it could happen to Butch. Or to Alex.

As they hit a clear spot in the twisted foliage, there was a sudden, fearsome screech and the crazed man flew up into the air with a snare of woven vines cinched around one leg. Butch stumbled and half fell, legs dangling down into a loosely covered pit, as he clutched at tangled roots to prevent himself from slipping all the way in. Alex threw herself to the left to avoid the hole, but the shambling woman was not so lucky. She fell, her massive bulk crashing to the bottom of the pit. Sharpened sticks punched through her doughy, sunburnt flesh. She screamed, and blood bubbled up from her mouth and nose as she flailed and twisted like a gaffed fish.

Alex grabbed Butch's hand and helped him pull himself up in time to see a muddy figure drop down out of the tree and slash open the hanging man's throat. Copious amounts of blood spilled out, but his furious struggle did not slow at all. He continued arching his spine and flailing his arms, teeth snapping in the air as he twisted and spun.

The muddy figure turned toward them and they saw that it was female, her pale blue eyes vivid and arresting. That was all Butch could register before she lunged at him, taking three lightning quick swipes with her knife. The knife was not made of metal; it was silvery pale and pearlescent in the dull glow of the camera lights. As its

wicked edge slashed Butch's T-shirt, missing his skin by a hair's breadth as he threw his elbows back and tucked in his stomach to avoid it, Butch realized that it was a sharpened piece of shell.

She pulled up and back for another swing and Butch grabbed her arm in a top wristlock. Her skin was slippery, but he was able to keep his grip as he forced her wrist back and pushed her to the ground. He went down with her, one knee in her face and the other in her side. Her pale eyes were wide and furious, glaring at the tip of the shell knife that was pointing down at her face. Then, a sudden bolt of electricity shot though Butch's skull and he let go of the woman's wrist and staggered back, shaken and disoriented with a horrible nauseating sensation crawling over the surface of his skin like electric worms. The muddy woman rolled away, springing catlike to her feet.

"Stop it!" Alex yelled, throwing herself between them. "Listen to me. Fuck this stupid game. Can't you see something terrible has happened?"

The muddy woman turned and looked up over her shoulder at the suspended man. His throat was cut to the bone, but he continued to struggle. In the pit, the fat woman was still twitching and squirming on the sharpened sticks.

"What the hell is going on here?" The woman asked.

Butch finally recognized her, the chick with the bad haircut. The blonde. He wondered if any of the other women were still alive. "I don't know," he said. "But whatever it is, I think it's contagious."

Those sharp blue eyes fixed back on Butch. "Contagious?"

Butch told her about the men who came up out of the water.

"So what are you saying?" the woman said. "Are you saying they are like some kind of zombies?"

"I have no idea," Butch said. "I'm telling you what happened."

"I'm saying we're fucked unless we find a way off this island," Alex said.

"Fuck, yeah," a thickly accented voice spoke up from the nearby brush. "Count me in, man."

It was the wiry Mexican guy with the goatee and bad tattoos: topless girls in sombreros and praying hands and lots of old English

lettering. Several teardrops were inked below his left eye.

"Beto Nuñez," he said. "What's the plan?"

"Butch," said Butch. "This is Alex and..." He turned toward the muddy woman.

She spat and gave the newcomer a stony glare. "Fuck you," she said. "Why don't you go hang out in the Home Depot parking lot if you're looking for day labor."

"Strength in numbers," Butch said, offering a hand for the Mexican guy to shake. "Whatever's going on here is going to kill us all if we don't work together. You speak Spanish, right?"

"Por supuesto," Beto said.

"So if we make it to the mainland, we could definitely use someone who can speak the native language, right?" Butch said.

The woman nodded grudgingly.

"Okay then," Butch said. "We're all beat to shit, or at least I know I am. Let's hole up and get some rest if we can. We'll try to come up with some kind of plan in the morning."

"It's not safe," Alex said. "What if those things come back? Or that masked guy?"

"We take turns keeping watch," the woman said, leaping up and catching hold of the first branch of a towering tree and hauling herself up. "Come on."

Alex looked doubtfully up at the woman as she monkeyed easily up the tree.

"What's your name?" Alex asked.

"It's Valkyrie Randall," she said, settling into a comfortable fork. "But my friends call me Val."

"Right on, Val," Beto said, grabbing the low branch and following her up the tree.

"You," Val said, "can call me Ms Randall."

"It's gonna be a long night," Butch said to Alex as he started up the tree after the bickering pair.

SIXTEEN

Dr Michael Fraiker had been working for the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social in a small government sponsored clinic in Quepos for under a month. He was still amazed, baffled and enchanted by Costa Rica and all its curious and often contradictory glory. It was without a doubt one of the most breathtakingly beautiful places on earth and nearly every day, he experienced something totally unbelievable.

On his first night there, he had been driving through pouring rain, inching along and squinting through the deluge, and he had missed the unmarked dirt road that led to the small house provided for him by the clinic. While looking for a place to turn around, he nearly hit a wet, mopey-looking creature that he had mistaken for a German shepherd until it turned its long skinny head to peer at him with a tiny eye. It had been a giant anteater, cruising along the side of the road as if it had no idea of its own stunning improbability. When he asked his cheerful American neighbor why she hung tin pie plates over the horses' stalls in her rickety stable, she had replied in the most matter-of-fact way that the reflective plates confused the radar of the local vampire bats and kept them off her sleeping animals. Vampire bats. It was unreal. There were monkeys and toucans and crocodiles and sloths. It was like living in a zoo with no bars.

Then there were the women. Dr Fraiker was twenty-nine and more than a little geeky, tall and thin, with hunched shoulders and large feet. He had never had much luck with women back in the States, but in Costa Rica, he suddenly found himself with more female interest than he'd ever dreamed of. Tica women were friendly and totally open about sex. And they were all interested in him. He could suddenly pick and choose from a veritable smorgasbord of beautiful women, but there was really only one he was genuinely interested in.

Her name was Jucilei and she worked in a tiny restaurant two doors down from the little clinic. The blond American surfer types who hung around her like hungry sharks called her "Juicy" and for good reason. She was a stunning natural beauty with big hazel eyes fringed with thick dark lashes, and long, sleek chestnut hair, which

brushed the upper curve of her round and saucy bottom. She, like all the other local Tica girls, seemed to subscribe to a curiously asymmetrical kind of modesty. She was often seen wearing pants slung so low that the cleavage of her spectacular ass cheeks was on display even when she stood straight upright, yet she also wore a thick, padded bra, even with skimpy halter tops, as if showing even a hint of nipple would be totally obscene. Aussie Dave, who tended bar at Croco, the comfortable and homey open air bar Dr Fraiker frequented on his days off, was the one who first pointed out this curious contradiction.

"If you want to know if a girl is Tica or Turista," the brash, blond Australian told Dr Fraiker over icecold Bavarias his first week in, "then check the headlights.

Aussie Dave had nodded his head toward a gaggle of young women at the end of the bar. They all looked Latina, but one was wearing a thin Indian cotton tie-died blouse and the nipples of her small, high breasts were quite prominently displayed through the sheer, sweaty fabric. The other girls were in tight, short skirts and tiny halters, but they all wore the same solid, weirdly unflattering white bras, as if they had got some kind of bulk discount.

"Where you from, darling?" Aussie Dave asked the girl in the sheer top, placing another umbrella frilled pink concoction on the bar in front of her.

"New York," she replied.

"And what about you lovelies?" he asked the bra-wearing foursome.

"Perez."

"Perez."

"Perez."

"Si, Perez."

"Did they say Paris?" Dr Fraiker asked, when Aussie Dave returned smirking and triumphant.

"They mean San Isidro," Aussie Dave replied. "The locals call it Perez Zeledón or mostly Perez."

"Right," Dr Fraiker said, stealing a glance back down the bar. The two girls on the end smiled and waved at him and he blushed and

looked down into his beer.

Dr Fraiker didn't believe Aussie Dave about the bra thing at first, but the more he looked around, the more he found this to be true. Even small-breasted women wore thick padded bras all the time. He had to admit, the restriction made him that much more curious. He would have given anything for a chance to see Jucilei's nipples.

She was never sick herself, but her grandfather, who ran one of the tour boats, was suffering from chronic emphysema, so she was a frequent visitor to the clinic. The first time she brought the old man in, she immediately started flirting shamelessly with Dr Fraiker, so much so that he was afraid he would make some awful mistake and give her grandfather the wrong medication. Dr Fraiker strove to remain professional as he listened to her oblivious grandfather's labored breathing and she sat there smiling her sweet heartbreaking smile and twisting a glossy strand of hair around her finger, batting those long dark lashes. From that day on, she always made excuses to come by the clinic, to bring him little snacks or fruit juice and she was fiercely smart, always curious about everything and asking intuitive and thoughtful questions. In a different world, she would have made an excellent doctor. She called him Dr Mike and kept on wondering aloud if he had a girlfriend back in the States. He desperately wanted to ask her out, but he had no idea what one did on a date here in this wild wonderland. She seemed to know everyone in the town and frequented the wilder bars and clubs along the beach and could probably come up with something, but he kept on finding excuses to put it off and continued pining from a distance.

That Saturday morning when she showed up pounding on the door to his little house at seven, her nipples were the last things on his mind. She was with two teenage Tico kids, and one of the boys was holding an infant.

"Juicy?" he said, befuddled and sluggish as he fumbled for his glasses. He had not meant to call her that, but it slipped out.

"Dr Mike," Jucilei said. "This baby is sick."

"Okay," he said, hooking his glasses over his ears and peering at the bundle held by the taller of the two boys. It was wrapped in a

beach towel, face covered and squirming forcefully. Dr Fraiker could hear muffled cries. "What's wrong with the baby?"

"They don't know," Jucilei said. "They tell me they find him like this."

Dr Fraiker reached out and pulled back the towel to uncover the infant's face and then made a barely audible shocked noise.

The infant's eyes bulged horribly in their sockets, weeping blood at the corners, and his little head lunged from side to side, spine arching dramatically. He had a rag tied tightly around his mouth. Dr Fraiker took the baby and set it down on his kitchen table.

"Why is there a rag around his mouth?" he asked, fumbling with the knots as the agitated baby writhed, squirmed and threatened to roll off the table. The baby's skin was as hot as an iron skillet.

The taller boy said something in Spanish.

"He say he wants to bite," Jucilei translated.

"What?"

At that moment the rag came off, and the baby's toothless mouth snapped furiously at Dr Fraiker's hand.

"Jesus," Dr Fraiker said, snatching his hand away. . The baby's arching and squirming doubled to almost seizure-like intensity. "Ask him where he found the baby. Dondé?"

The boy replied and Jucilei translated.

"On a boat." She paused to let him continue. "The boat was on the beach." Again, she listened. "There was blood, but nobody was there." Again. "Nobody but this baby."

Dr Fraiker peeled down the towel and examined the chubby little body. It was covered in dried blood but seemed unharmed except for a rather nasty-looking bite mark on one thigh. The small round bite looked distressingly human.

"Okay," Dr Fraiker said, running his fingers through his disheveled, sandy hair. "We need to get this baby to the clinic right away."

At the clinic, Dr Fraiker contacted the hospital in San José and made arrangements for the infant to be transported as soon as possible. At first he had considered the possibility that febrile seizures could be causing the squirming and violent agitation.

However, in spite of the high fever, a seizure could not possibly last so long, and the boys who found the baby claimed he had been like this non-stop since they found him. The symptoms were similar to that of rabies. The level of agitation was so extreme; Dr Fraiker had never seen anything like it. And the eyes, the horrible, bloody, bulging eyes. Could there be some kind of cerebral hemorrhage? Some kind of inner pressure that was pushing the eyes from their sockets? He sent one of the boys to gather more information on the empty boat. He was horrified by what he found.

The boat apparently belonged to a man and wife named Salvador and Ana Leonor Rojas who ran fishing tours out to the various islands off the Pacific Coast. Their three children, Liliana, Jorge and baby Nando, always rode out with them. The boat had gone out at dawn with four American tourists, two older couples from Florida. It returned with only the infant son in this bizarre and inexplicable state. Just the infant and a huge quantity of blood.

Dr Fraiker began to feel a slow, creeping kind of dread as he placed the tightly restrained, still agitated infant into an improvised quarantine area in the clinic's back room. The doctor washed his hands. He crouched over the sink scrubbing and scrubbing until his skin was red and sore. He was haunted by dark visions of Marburg or Ebola or something new, some new impossible virus from the depths of the jungle that had suddenly decided to make the brash and ballsy hop to humans and make itself at home.

There were Americans missing, presumed dead. This was going to be a major international incident and his actions would be scrutinized and reported on by every level of the Costa Rican and American governments. He was terrified, intimidated and totally out of his league. He pulled down a yellowed sheet of typewritten numbers off the wall by the phone and called the American embassy.

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Caleb didn't understand what the problem was with Costa Rica. It was like an entire country of potheads. Often, nobody bothered to do anything, build anything or fix anything. The roads were horrendous,

secondary airstrips primitive at best. Lucky for the wildlife, not so lucky for a type "A" television producer that needed to get the hell out of San José.

Caleb maintained constant contact with Alan via satellite phone while shouting at the unflappable Tico officials, whose job seemed to consist of nothing more than smiling and being in his way. He was eventually able to bull and bribe his way out to the coast where he had a boat and a team of bad men to find Jason and help figure out what the hell went wrong

Gerda's sultry voice came on the line while Caleb was loading his brand spanking new SIGARMS Granite .45.

"I have a Mr David Talridge on the line, sir."

"Who?" Caleb slapped the clip in the grip and frowned.

"Talridge," a reedy voice spoke up. "I understand you have yourself a situation out on Isla Negra."

"It's handled," Caleb responded. "Who is this again?"

"David Talridge, Chargé d'Affaires, US Embassy."

"Well, Ambassador," Caleb began, trying to pull something reassuring out of his deep-fried brain.

"Chargé d'Affaires," the man replied. "The Ambassador is currently in Idaho, attending a university summit on agricultural exchange."

"Right," Caleb said, refusing to be flummoxed or caught off guard. "I can assure you, there is no cause for any official concern on the part of the embassy."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to disagree rather vehemently with you on that point, Mr Carson," Talridge said. "I am personally concerned about the outbreak of what appears to be an unknown disease of a rather dire nature that was recently witnessed on your..." He paused. "Television program."

He said the words "television program" like he would have said "clogged toilet" or "radioactive waste". Caleb bristled.

"Look," he said, putting on his "big Hollywood honcho talking to backwoods hick" tone. "I'm gonna let you in on a piece of television magic, but you have to promise to keep our little secret. Obviously, I'm flattered that you were so impressed with the special digital effects and make-up techniques used on the show. We wanted to go

for a realistic look and apparently it worked—almost too well. But I promise you, it's all a lot of latex and corn syrup.

Silence for a moment on the line and Caleb feared the connection had been broken. Then the man on the other end spoke up and Caleb felt a cold, slick fist of dread closing around his heart.

"At twelve minutes past six, this morning, a boat washed up on the beach in Quepos, north of Manuel Antonio national park," Talridge said. "The boat's owners, two of their children and the four American tourists who'd chartered that boat less than an hour before were nowhere to be found. The only apparent survivor is a seven month-old infant. The infant appears to be infected with a mysterious virus whose symptoms are similar in nature to those displayed by the contestants on your show."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Caleb replied, struggling not to panic. What the hell was going on out there? "There is no virus on my island. Only paid actors."

"Well, Mr Carson, that is really beside the point. I have been asked to request that the filming of your television show be stopped immediately and that you cooperate fully with the government officials that have been sent to identify and quarantine the virus before it is allowed to spread."

"You are out of your mind!" Caleb said. "Do you have any idea how many millions of dollars are riding on this season? There is absolutely no way that I am going to shut down the game now."

"I'm afraid you have no choice," Talridge said.

"Boss," the captain of his boat called. "We got a problem."

There was a ring of military ships surrounding Isla Negra

"Aw, fuck," Caleb said.

SEVENTEEN

Alex hadn't woken up feeling so stiff since her first days of training with Mark. The skin on her ass, thighs and back was pink and corrugated from the rough bark of the tree and there were bugs tangled in her hair. The sun could not have been up for long and it was already brutally hot and steam bath humid. In spite of the heat, she would have sold her soul for a pair of pants. The skimpy and useless thong was not much better than being naked, and her torn and knotted rag of a T-shirt was barely up to the job of covering the absolute legal minimum of her oversized breasts.

She felt like the She-Hulk, someone's adolescent jack-off fantasy of a sweaty, muscular woman busting out of her clothes. Though, if this was someone's sex fantasy, her hair would probably be clean and she would not be quite so desperately in need of a shower, deodorant and toothbrush.

Even as weary, sore and bone deep exhausted as she was, she hadn't really been able to sleep and had only drifted off in fits and starts. Besides, the truth was that sleeping was no better than waking. Worse even. She had been plagued by nightmare images of the white-suited men lurching up out of the water with their bulging bloody eyes and jagged, broken teeth.

The four of them had taken turns keeping watch. Alex had only been able to let herself doze when Butch was awake and on guard. She did not trust that Val woman and the Mexican guy was an unknown quantity. She found herself regretting her paranoia. She was close to hallucinating from exhaustion. Everything seemed too bright, obnoxiously over-detailed. The rustling leaves, the tangled vines, the weird, spidery orchids. Birds of every conceivable color, and then some. There were raucous, hooting monkeys that were less than thrilled about the presence of these large hairless, non-native primates in what they viewed as had trespassed in their own arboreal territory. Alex was afraid they were going to start flinging poop at her at any moment.

"Good morning," Butch said softly when he saw Alex stirring and shaking out the kinks in her knotted neck and shoulders.

"Good?" Alex said, picking ants from her hair. "I wouldn't go so far as to call it a good morning."

"Good as it's gonna get," Val said. "You're alive, ain't you?"

She slashed a vine beside her head and held it over her mouth, drinking from the gush of liquid inside and being careful not to let the slender stem touch her lips.

"Alive for now, anyway," the Mexican guy said, running a hand over his stubbly head and then crossing himself and kissing the back of his thumb. "So," Val said, squatting, straddling two sturdy branches. "Plans?"

To Alex's amazement, Val pulled the crotch of her filthy shorts to one side and pissed down onto the ground. Alex looked away, out across the leafy canopy. When she looked back, the Mexican guy was pissing down onto the ground beside Val with a big smile on his face.

"Don't get any ideas, Pablo," Val said, smoothing her shorts back over her crotch.

"My name is Beto, güera," he replied, shaking off the last drops and tucking his tattooed dick back into his shorts. "But you can call me El Chiludo."

"Look, we need to get the hell off this island," Butch said. "That's critical. This place is a death trap. If we stay here, we're as good as dead."

"We make a raft," Val said. "We'd need to figure a way to store fresh water for the trip, but I know we could make it to the mainland."

"Right," Beto said. "But what about these fucking camera things? You heard the rules, we leave the island and bam!" He spread his tattooed fingers wide around his face. "Off go our fucking heads, man."

"I think I have an idea how to disable these camera rigs," Val said. "It's a matter of bypassing the main cable and tricking it into thinking that it's still connected. Let me do one of yours and while I'm working, be sure to watch real careful so you can do the same for mine."

She reached out toward Butch and he slid back along the branch, wary.

"You're crazy," Butch said. "There's no way I'm letting you blow my head off."

Alex's fingers unconsciously traveled over the contours of the headset. She shook her head.

"Uh-huh," Alex said. "No way."

"What do you say, Chiludo?" Val said with a wide smile. "You a gambling man?"

Beto squinted at her. "You really think you can do it?"

She shrugged. "We don't know until we try."

"Fuck it," Beto said. "If we're gonna die anyway..."

Alex watched anxiously with her heart in her throat as Val scraped her shell knife along the tree trunk, shaving off little curls of bark until she was able to collect a bead of amber sap on the end of the blade. She let the sticky droplet slide down onto the connection between the camera rig and the thick black wire that ran across to the power pack on the back of the head. Sweat was pouring off the curve of Beto's scalp. He was trying to keep his stone cold, badass face, but his eyes were wide, ringed with white all the way around.

"Come on," he said. "Do it."

"Here goes nothing," she said.

Beto crossed himself three times in quick succession and squeezed his eyes shut. Val cut the wire above the bead of sap.

Nothing happened.

"Did it work?" Alex asked.

Beto's shaking hands went to his temples. There was a thin, almost tasty smell, like burnt maple syrup.

"The sap is blocking the connection so the machine can't tell it's been disconnected," Val said.

Butch nodded, squinting at Val and back at Beto. "Okay, you win," he said. "Get this fucking thing off me.'

That's when Beto's head exploded.

Alex threw her hands over her face, but was too slow to stop the hot gush of blood and head cheese from blinding her. She almost

toppled backward off the branch and had to flail her arms wildly to catch her balance.

"Fuck!" Butch yelled.

"Well," Val said. "Guess that didn't work."

"You killed him, you crazy bitch," Butch said.

"Fuck you," Val replied. "I had to try."

Alex tried to wipe the blood from her eyes and when she did, she was sorry she could see again.

Beto's mostly headless body was hung up on a branch about three feet below them. He had nothing left but a small rag of stubbly scalp hanging from the bony, smoking stub of his neck. All three of them were splattered with blood, brains and sharp flecks of bone. Val and Butch looked about ready to start swinging at each other again, all angry teeth and wide eyes in their wet, bloody faces.

"You fucking killed him," Butch said again.

She shrugged. "I didn't kill nobody white."

"What the fuck does that have to do with anything?" Butch asked.

"Are you telling me that the wetback was your bosom butt buddy now that he's dead?" Val scowled. "You didn't even know him."

"Look," Butch said. "Whether we knew him or not, that doesn't mean it's okay to use him like a goddamn lab rat."

"I didn't see you volunteering, tough guy," Val replied.

"Okay," Alex said, hands up and trying desperately to defuse the situation. "Okay, fine, it didn't work. So we need to come up with some other kind of plan."

"What plan?" Butch asked. "There is no fucking plan. The plan is we're trapped here and we fucking die here, that's the fucking plan."

"There's always a way," Val said. "I won't give up."

"Fuck you," Butch said. "We're dead."

"Fuck you both," Alex said, turning away and easing down the trunk of the tree, trying not slip or to look at the headless remains of Beto on her way down. "I'm getting cleaned up."

Alex walked away from her companions' useless, spiraling argument and crouched down over a little stream, splashing the water over her sticky face and chest until she felt as clean as she was going to get. She drank a few mouthfuls, trying to ignore the fact that

she was starting to get really hungry. Then, she froze with one dripping hand halfway to her mouth when she heard a stealthy crackle of footsteps in the foliage behind her. She spun toward the sound and found herself looking down the barrel of a large rifle.

Behind the rifle was a camo-clad soldier in a helmet and complex, insectoid gas mask.

"Are you sick?" he asked, his voice muffled behind the mask. "Say something."

Alex raised her hands, eyes wide. "Something?"

The soldier lowered the rifle and pushed the mask down around his neck.

"Thank God," he said. "I thought you might have been one of them crazy ones."

He looked like barely more than a teenager, dark haired and sweet faced, a little chubby in the cheeks. He spoke with a hint of a southern drawl and was trying to grow a mustache, though not having much luck so far. The name patch above his breast pocket read: "DEVORE". He was clearly terrified.

"Are there..." Alex paused and wiped her mouth. "More like you? More soldiers?"

"Yeah," the kid said. "We was fighting them crazy ones and I got separated from my squad. We're here with doctors. We came to get everyone off the island and contain this freaky virus that's got everybody all crazy."

He looked back anxiously over his shoulder. Alex could have kissed him. She felt a huge wave of shaky relief wash over her and she clenched her fists, feeling close to tears. They were saved. Soldiers, order, official people. It was over.

"Hey! Butch, Val," Alex called.

Butch shimmied quickly down the tree with the wary Val close behind.

"Soldiers," Alex said. "They're here to take us off the island."

"The fuck they are," Val said, hanging slightly back. "Don't trust him."

"What the hell is your problem?" Alex asked.

"Think about it," Val said, clenching her shell knife tight in one fist. "There's an outbreak of a deadly virus on this island. They're here to contain it. How do you contain a virus?"

"You quarantine the area," Butch replied. "Nobody goes in or out."

"That's right," Val said.

"Nah, that ain't right," the young soldier said. "We're supposed to round up the remaining contestants, get y'all off the island and contain you safely back on the ship. That's our orders."

"Don't believe him," Val said.

"Shush," Butch said. "Listen."

Val cocked her head.

"Radio," she said. "More soldiers?"

Alex strained to listen. She thought she heard a faint crackle of static and a low voice reciting numbers between the static. It seemed to be getting louder.

"It must by my squad," the kid said.

"You don't know that," Val said.

"Quiet, everyone," Butch said. "I think I see them."

Through the trees, camouflage shadows were moving stealthily toward them. Helmeted heads and masked faces could be glimpsed between the branches.

"It's my guys," the kid said. "I can hear the base camp calling Sergeant Colsom." He raised his hand. "Hey, sarge! Hey, it's me, Devo! I'm here! Over here!"

"Shut up!" Val said.

But it was too late. The figures froze and heads turned toward the sound of the kid's voice. Alex could make out deep bloody gashes through their torn clothing, smashed lenses in the gas masks and those horrible wide bulging eyes beneath.

"Oh shit," Alex said as the infected soldiers started crashing eagerly toward them.

"Devo," Butch said between tightly clenched teeth. "Look at me. Is that your name? Devo?"

The kid tore his eyes away from the advancing soldiers and looked at Butch. He nodded.

"It's Gilbert Devore," he said. "But about everybody calls me Devo. Except my mom."

He looked back at the advancing squad. They were closer, fighting through the tangled underbrush.

"Listen to me, Devo," Butch said. "They're infected. You need to give us weapons or we're dead."

"What?" The kid turned back to Butch, frowning.

"You heard him," Val said.

"We don't have a chance without weapons, Butch said. "Hurry."

The kid turned wild eyes back the advancing soldiers as they fought and tore their way through the thick jungle foliage.

"I can't do that," he said. "It's against regulation."

"Fuck regulation," Butch said, reaching for the side arm on the kid's hip.

"I said I can't do that!" the kid said, raising the muzzle of his rifle up to Butch's chest, eyes bouncing from Butch to the advancing soldiers and back.

"Sure you can," Val said.

In an instant she had slipped behind the kid and had the shell knife pressed up under his chin.

"Shit!" the kid said, lowering the barrel of the rifle.

The soldiers were almost on them as Butch pulled the kid's handgun from its holster. Val helped herself to a nice survival knife that looked as if it had never been used and tossed the machete from the kid's belt toward Alex.

Alex caught the huge knife in time to let out a startled grunt and bury, it deep into the reaching arm of one of the infected soldiers. In a moment of mad chaos, it seemed the soldiers were all around them, bloody clutching hands and huge, crazy eyes, clumps of dirt and leaves sticking to the clotting gore and ground into gaping wounds. The soldier with the machete hung up in the thick muscle of his arm was blond and ruddy, bearded with gore. His helmet and gas mask had been knocked off and both hung skewed and tangled down his back. The straps looked like they should have been choking him, they were digging so deeply into his muscular neck, but he didn't seem to

notice. She wrenched the machete free from the soldier's arm and kicked him back, heart screaming in her chest.

Val and Butch stood close by, nearly back-to-back, each brandishing their newfound weapon. The young kid was off to one side, looking like panic was about to mow him down like a speeding train. Alex crouched back against the trunk of a tree, watching in horror as violence exploded all around her in lurid nightmare flashes.

One of the soldiers was lurching toward the young kid and a kind of terrified recognition cut through the panic in the kid's face.

"Ronnie?" he said, brows knitted. "Ronnie, it's me, Devo. Don't you know me, Ronnie?"

Apparently, Ronnie did not know him, because he lunged at the kid with lips skinned back from broken teeth, snarling like a rabid animal. The kid let out a string of terrified curses and pushed the soldier to one side with the muzzle of his rifle. As the soldier staggered and fell, he reached out and clutched at his arm. Shattered, exposed finger bones tore the kid's uniform sleeve and raked long gashes in the flesh of the kid's forearm. He yelped and tumbled away.

Alex jumped, startled at the sharp rapport of a gunshot. She turned to see Butch firing the kid's side arm point-blank into one of the advancing soldiers' gore-crusted chest. A tall, slim soldier, with one arm severed at the elbow, did not flinch. No reaction. Butch fired a second shot into the head and the one armed soldier staggered a little, seeming more disoriented than hurt by the bullet, but only for a scant second. Then, he refocused on Butch and leapt at him.

"Fuck," Butch shouted, and kicked the one-armed soldier in the chest, knocking him back and away.

Val was slashing away with the knife, cutting throats and slicing open bellies and thighs, but all to no avail. The soldiers were no more affected by their wounds than the white-suited men or the two contestants from the night before. Not only that, but the thick, suffocating heat seemed to have no effect on them either. It was wearing Val, Butch, Devo and Alex down fast.

"We're fucked!" Val called.

"Ronnie," the kid was saying. "Fuck, I'm sorry, man."

He placed his muddy boot on Ronnie's chest, holding him down as he raised the rifle and put a bullet in his buddy's forehead. The soldier continued to flail and growl, clutching at the leg of the kid's fatigues.

Alex was starting to feel shell-shocked, overwhelmed and sluggish, her thoughts disjointed and nonsensical. The heat was exhausting, and she was drenched in sweat and dizzy, spangles fluttering in the corners of her vision. She tried to count the attackers. Were there four? Five? She was having trouble telling them apart. Another soldier lunged at her, this one masked and unrecognizable. She brought the machete down, slashing at the curve of his helmetless, shaved head. One of the mask straps severed and the gas mask fell to one side, exposing a single huge eye as fat and red as a peeled plum. He kept coming. She kicked his legs out from under him and leapt back and away, crashing awkwardly into a tree and knocking the wind out of herself. Her heart was slamming against her ribs and she felt close to passing out. This was hopeless. They were going to die.

Then she saw Butch to her left, rolling over and over in the dirt with a crazed and slavering soldier. The soldier was snapping at Butch like a rabid dog as Butch torqued the guy's arm back until Alex saw it snap against the bend of the elbow. The bone cracked and shattered, a shard pierced up from beneath the skin. The soldier seemed totally unaffected by pain, the broken bone or anything Butch was able to hit him with, and he continued to strain hungrily toward Butch's terrified face. Alex realized that all of Butch's training and fighting skills were completely useless against this onslaught of infected and enraged attackers. She could see that he was tiring. He was on top of the soldier, pressing down on the other man's shoulders and neck, but the gnashing teeth were getting closer and closer to Butch's face. Butch was losing and with that realization, something snapped inside Alex, shattering her paralysis.

She let out a furious shriek and rushed toward Butch with the machete raised high. She brought that huge blade down with all her power across the soldier's wide-open mouth. The top third of the soldier's head lolled backward at the jaw joint, and she brought the machete down again. The top of the head was severed from the lower

third and went skittering across the jungle floor. The soldier's body spasmed furiously and then went limp. Butch looked up at her and then shoved the body off to one side and stood.

"Thanks," he said. His hands were shaking.

"I guess we're even," she said.

Whatever he might have said next was lost in a string of gunshots as Devo screamed at the top of his lungs, firing round after round into his buddy's head until there was nothing left of his skull but a wet, red smear in the dirt.

"Val," Butch called.

"What?" Val was fighting off two soldiers at once, slashing at their faces and kicking them back again and again. She too was close to being overwhelmed.

"You gotta cut the heads off!" Butch said. "Or blow them off. That's the only way to stop them."

Val nodded. "Right," she said, dodging her current dance partners and slipping around to where Butch and Alex stood. "Butch and I..." She was bent forward, sucking wind. "Will immobilize the fuckers..." Another set of deep breaths. "Alex and Cool Breeze over there..." She paused again, swallowing hard and raising the knife as the remaining soldiers turned to attack. "Liberate them from their infected heads. Got it?"

Alex nodded.

"You hear me, Cool Breeze?"

The kid looked up from the mess at his feet, the mess that used to be his friend. "Yeah, uh, right," he said.

"So grab a fucking machete," Val said, ducking a lunging soldier and neatly hamstringing him, kicking him toward the trembling kid. "And get to work."

"Jesus," the kid said, looking down at the twitching, flopping man. "Sergeant Colsom. This is totally fucked."

"Now you're getting it," Val replied.

The kid reached for his dead friend's machete and cut off his commanding officer's head. He stared at the headless body for a few shell-shocked seconds and then turned away and vomited violently against a tree trunk.

Butch had the last infected soldier tied up in a pretzel-like hold face down in the dirt.

"Alex," he called. "Do it."

Alex looked away from the vomiting kid and nodded, hefting the machete. She swung harder this time and was able to separate the head from the body with one blow. It rolled away to bounce off the kid's boot, and when he looked down and saw it, gas mask still attached, he bent over and puked again.

"So much for the fucking establishment heroes coming to save our asses," Val said, wiping her knife clean on the fatigues of the headless body at her feet. "Get as many machetes as you can. Guns and ammo too, in case we run into any..." She smirked. "Conventional enemies."

"Right," Butch said, gathering up firearms and stacking them in the center of the bloodbath.

"When you're done feeling sorry for yourself, Soldier Boy," Val said, "how about giving us a hand?"

The kid slumped at the base of a tree, head down between his knees and hands over his face. He looked like he was crying.

"Devo?" Butch said, laying another rifle on the pile. "You okay?"

"Fucking pansy ass," Val snorted, pulling a bloody machete from a dead soldier's belt.

The kid looked up and his face was pale; thick beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"He doesn't look so good," Alex said.

"Devo," Butch said again. "What's wrong, buddy?"

The kid held his arm out to Butch like a child who wants his daddy to give him a Band-Aid. "Hurts."

The scratches across his forearm were puffy and red, oozing dark, sluggish blood.

"Jesus," Butch said. "We need to clean that."

The kid sniffed and wiped tears from his eyes. His knuckles came away bloody.

"Holy shit!" Val said.

"What?" Devo asked, wiping his eyes again. Tears of blood were rolling down his pale cheeks.

"He's infected," Val said. "Look at his eyes."

"I am not," the kid said, but there was a shaky note of panic in his voice.

"He is," Val said, grabbing a handgun from the pile and thumbing off the safety. "Get back Butch. Don't make me shoot you both."

"Don't let her kill me!" the kid begged, hands up in surrender. "I'm okay, really. I got some blood in my eye."

"Drop your weapon!" a deep, authoritative voice called out.

Val spun toward the voice and met a brace of soldiers—normal soldiers—masks on and guns aimed at Val's head.

"Dammit," Val said, lowering the gun. "He's infected, look at him. We need to cut off his head before he freaks out and attacks us."

"Fuck that," Devo said. "I'm fine. She's crazy, man."

"Tell 'em," Val said helplessly gesturing toward Butch and Alex.

"He got scratched," Butch said. "Not bit."

"It's not in the saliva, it's in the blood," Val said. "Like fucking AIDS, you get their blood in an open wound."

"What's your name, soldier?" asked the deep voice.

"De... Devore, sir."

"Private Mitchell," the deep-voiced man said. "Tend to Private Devore's wound, get it cleaned and bandaged."

"Yes, sir," one of the other masked soldiers replied

"Private Sherkam, Private Catalano?" the deep-voiced man continued.

A third and a fourth soldier stepped forward, responding in unison like twins.

"Yes, sir?"

"Take the contestants into custody."

"Aw, shit," Val said.

The soldiers handcuffed Val first, then Butch, and Alex last.

"Yay, soldiers," Val whispered in a high facetious tone, head tilted toward Alex. "Hooray, we're saved!"

"Shut up," Butch said.

"Sarge?" the grunt leaning over Devo called.

"What is it, Mitchell?" the deep voiced man replied.

"I think—"

That was all that the soldier was able to say before Devo lunged at him and locked his teeth onto the soldier's wrist. Devo's eyes were huge, swollen, bloody in their sockets and rolling madly.

"Fuck!" the soldier yelped. "Get him off me, man."

Val made a swift dash to the left. However, from behind a soldier her caught her by the arm and forced Val to the ground.

"I told you," Val screamed. "I fucking told you!"

Guns went off all around them in a deafening barrage and Val hit the dirt. Butch grabbed the back of Alex's shirt and pulled her down with him. Alex pressed her face into the ground and waited to die.

"Cut their fucking heads off!" Val was screaming, and then someone was yanking Alex roughly by her feet and telling her to run, emphasizing their point with the muzzle of a rifle.

Alex did what she was told.

EIGHTEEN

They ran for what felt like ages, heat pounding down and making it hard to breathe as they chopped and tore their way through the jungle. Alex's heart was beating so hard that she couldn't tell if she heard people following them or not. When they finally broke out of the jungle and onto the beach, they found themselves in a makeshift camp of camouflage tents and stacked crates. There were only three soldiers left in their group, including the one with the deep voice, who ordered Alex, Butch and Val through the camp and brought them before a neat little whippet of a man with a gray mustache who had to be a senior officer..

"I am Colonel Thomas Bing," the man told them "I am here to see you off this island and get you all safely back into custody."

"Lovely," Val said under her breath.

The guy glared at her and then turned his gaze on the man with the deep voice.

"Sergeant Blakely," Colonel Bing said. "What the hell is going on out there?"

"Sir," Blakely said, removing the gas mask and revealing a tan and handsome face. "I don't know what to tell you. My own men attacked us. They became infected with whatever the infected contestants seem to have. I've never seen anything like it, sir."

"Right," Colonel Bing replied, squinting into the sun. "I want you to contain the uninfected contestants until the chopper returns. Some of our boys took sick, so we evac-ed them back to the ship. As soon as the chopper returns, I want these people off the island. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Blakely replied.

He prodded the three of them into a low tent. Inside the tent was a young sweaty grunt and another contestant, the mild-looking businessman type. He was sitting Indian style, shirtless with his hands cuffed behind his back.

"Anderson, I want you to cuff all four of them together and keep an eye on them," Sergeant Blakely told the grunt. "They'll be hopping

the next bird out of this nightmare."

"Lucky bastards," the grunt replied, uncoiling a long loop of steel cable like a bicycle lock.

"Keep up that attitude and you're gonna find yourself on corpse detail, Anderson."

"Yes, sir," Anderson said. "Sorry, sir."

Anderson bound the four of them back to back in a circle around the central tent pole with the cable running between their elbows, over one arm and under the other. Alex and Butch were back to back. Val was on Alex's right and Travis on her left.

"Guess you guys know each other," Anderson said, clicking home the lock.

"I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure," the mild-faced man said. "Travis Henry."

"Travis Henry?" Butch's eyes went wide. "Holy shit."

Alex frowned. "What?"

"The Butcher is no doubt referring to my infamous history," Travis said. "You are also quite famous, aren't you, Mr Mahan."

"Infamous?" Alex repeated.

"Fucker killed seventy-eight people," Val said. "Twelve of them kids."

"Seventy-nine actually," Travis said.

"No shit?" Anderson said, wiping sweat from his brow with his olive drab T-shirt. "Damn."

"Kids?" Alex was appalled. "Jesus."

"We're all killers here," Travis said. "Isn't that right, Private Anderson?"

"Fuck you," Anderson said. "It don't count when it's the enemy. Everybody knows that."

"Interesting distinction," Travis said. "I will have to keep that in mind for future reference."

"Butch?" Alex said.

"Yeah," Butch replied.

The staccato sound of panicked gunfire outside the tent blew any thought of whatever Alex was about to ask right out of her mind. Anderson went wild-eyed and ran to the flap of the tent. To their

horror and amazement, a spray of bullets drove the young grunt backward in a spastic jig and he collapsed inches from Alex's boots.

"Fuck!" Alex said as she watched Anderson's body twitch and shudder, then grow still.

"Look," Val said. "He's really dead."

There were more gunshots and a whole orchestra of terrifying sounds, tearing, hissing and growling along with panicked shouting and agonized screams.

"What do you mean?" Butch asked, wrenching his hands back and forth pointlessly in the cuffs.

"I mean he isn't infected," Val said. "I was right. The infected blood has to get into your blood stream before you die in order to pass on the virus."

"Shit," Butch said. "I think you're right."

"We need to get free," Alex said, pulling at her cuffs till her wrists ached. "We need those keys."

Suddenly the tent flap opened and an infected soldier lurched in. He had a massive sucking chest wound that bubbled and hissed as he turned his bloody eyes on the four of them.

A blast of hot panic shot through Alex and she pulled with all her strength, snapping the tent pole and dragging the other three away from the snarling soldier. The camouflage canvas collapsed down on top of them, trapping them under its weight, along with the infected soldier.

In a mad moment of painful chaos, the four of them struggled, and pulled and twisted, yanking each other every which way, smothered beneath the thick canvass. They could feel the infected soldier flailing nearby but had no idea how close he really was.

"This way," Butch said, dragging everyone to their feet and pushing his way toward the edge of the tent. "Come on."

Alex struggled to follow, stumbling backward behind him, trying to keep upright. All she could see were dark shapes and an occasional flash of terrified eyes. Val was cursing a mile a minute on her right. Travis was silently pushing forward on the other side. There was a sudden solid *thunk* and Butch staggered back into Alex's shoulders, slumping down and pulling them all to the ground.

"Fuck," Val said, pushing at the canvas and finally lifting up an edge to reveal the tree Butch had run into. He wasn't out cold, but he was slouched and rubber legged, moaning softly.

"Butch?" Alex said over her shoulder. "Butch, are you okay?"

"He's down for the count," Val said.

It was like being chained to a side of beef. Butch pushed past two hundred pounds, and was by far the heaviest of them all. Alex could feel the canvas shaking as the infected soldier got closer and closer.

Without thinking twice, she leaned forward hard, raising Butch's dead weight up off his feet until he lay across her back. "Come on," she said, legs straining fiercely under his bulk.

They pushed their way out from under the canvas and into hell. All around them, soldiers were battling their infected brothers. They seemed to have caught on to the decapitation thing, but it was far too late to save them. More and more soldiers were dragged down and torn to shreds, only to rise again in an infected frenzy.

"Fuck," Butch said. "What the hell happened?"

Alex let him down slowly to his feet, her legs shaking so badly she could barely stand. She felt like she had done way too many hack squats and felt dizzy and sick with adrenaline and fear.

"You knocked yourself out, genius," Val said.

"That's a first," Butch said, rubbing the swelling knot on his forehead. He twisted his head back toward Alex. "Did you... carry me?"

"Look," Alex said. "There's Anderson."

The infected soldier under the collapsed tent was dragging the canvas away from them, toward the water, pulling with all the comical determination of a dog under a blanket. In the process, he had uncovered Anderson's corpse.

"We need those keys," Val said.

"Right," Alex said, taking the lead as they awkwardly made their way over to the fallen grunt.

"Ready?" Butch asked. "One, two..."

The four of them squatted down together over the corpse. Butch over the legs, Alex over the head and Travis and Val on either side

with their hands at waist level. Travis and Val each strained to reach one of the pockets, feeling blindly behind their backs.

"Hurry it up, kids," Butch said. "There's hardly any normal soldiers left."

He was right. The soldiers were losing, becoming infected one after the other. It was only a matter of time before the four of them were noticed and attacked.

Suddenly, without warning, Val was free. She had found the keys, unlocked her own handcuffs and bolted away.

"Get back here!" Butch yelled. "Don't leave us!"

An infected soldier heard the shout and came rushing toward them.

"Fuck!" Butch said as the infected soldier made a grab for Travis.

Travis kicked and struggled as Butch and Alex tore him free from the soldier's grip. Together the three of them took off after Val.

"Val, you fucking bitch!" Butch called.

Another infected soldier made a mad lunge at Val, and she staggered back. Butch, Alex and Travis were right behind Val and slammed into her, knocking her off her feet and kicking the infected soldier away.

"Keys," Butch said.

"Fuck you," Val spat, squirming away and turning down a narrow alley between two tents.

Butch led as they struggled to catch Val, turning down the path between the tents behind her.

"I hate to be a pest at a time like this," Travis said quietly.

"What?" Butch asked, kicking out at Val and missing.

"I'm afraid I've been bitten," Travis replied. "Here on my leg."

"Oh, shit!" Alex said.

"Val," Butch said. "Give us the keys."

Val stopped and looked back at them, conflict etched in her face.

"Don't let us die like this, " Butch said.

"Come on, Val," Alex said. "We need each other. You can't make it alone."

"Valkyrie," Travis said. "You really should give them the keys now."

Travis doubled over suddenly, vomiting violently and Butch and Alex tried to scoot as far away from him as the cable would allow.

"Now, Val!" Butch said.

Travis was still making low retching noises, his whole body shuddering uncontrollably.

"Jesus, Val," Butch said.

All around them, the infected soldiers began to turn toward the sounds of the argument. A low growl began in Travis's throat and the twitching stopped.

"Fuck," Alex said.

She and Butch turned until they were side by side, pulling the steel cable tight and keeping Travis behind them. Travis was wrenching his head from side to side, straining his neck to bite them.

Val had almost reached the other end of the alley between the tents when a hoard of infected soldiers appeared at the far end, blocking her path.

"Give us the fucking keys, Val!" Butch said as Val backed away from the approaching infected soldiers.

Val looked from the infected soldiers to Butch and back again, eyes narrow. Then, she rushed over to them and unlocked Alex with shaking hands.

Alex rubbed her lacerated wrists while Butch fought to keep Travis facing away from him. Butch swung Travis hard to the left, smashing him into a tent pole and then bent forward, flipping Travis up over his head. Travis landed in front of him, face down in the sand, facing away from Butch with his legs kicking in the air.

"Ready?" Val asked.

"Do it," Butch said.

Val unlocked the cable and Butch's cuffs who then twisted the cable around Travis's neck, swiftly garroting him. Val furiously kicked Travis's barely attached head until it snapped free and rolled away.

The infected soldiers were on them. They fought and kicked and struggled to keep them back. Val grabbed a machete from one of the fallen soldiers and started hacking. Alex was able to grab a rifle, but the trigger seemed stuck. She then raised the firearm, using the butt

as a club, to beat back the infected soldiers. Butch was using the steel cable to wrench off their heads but they kept coming, pouring in from both ends of the alley now.

"This way," Val said, lifting the edge of the tent to their right. "Hurry."

Butch held up the edge of the tent for Alex. She knocked back another soldier with the butt of the rifle and then dived under the raised canvas. Butch followed.

The tent's interior was dim, and was stacked with wooden crates. The canvas bulged and shuddered as the infected soldiers clawed at the sides of the tent, fighting to get inside.

"Come on!" Butch said, heading toward the tent flap on the far side.

"Wait," Val called, her fingers scrabbling around the edge of a crate.

"They're getting in," Butch said.

Bloody arms were reaching under the edges of the tent.

"Trust me," Val said. "We need to get this open."

Val was looking around for something to open the crate when Alex raised her boot and stomped down on the corner of the crate as hard as she could. The wood groaned and split. Alex continued to kick the crate until it split open, spilling its contents across the floor.

Bumpy metal ovoids, like olive, drab Easter eggs.

Grenades.

Val grabbed as many as she could hold and dodged away as the soldiers started worming under the edges of the tent, reaching for her. "Go!"

They pushed open the tent flap and ducked outside. Val turned, pulled the pin on a grenade and tossed it back into the tent.

They'd run about ten feet when a series of massive explosions threw them sprawling on the sand. Alex felt the pressure of the blasts pressing in on her eyes and eardrums as she flung her arms over her head.

Butch gripped Alex's arm and hauled her to her feet. He was saying something, but her ears were ringing too loud to hear. Behind her, infected soldiers were on fire, wheeling around with arms flailing and

crawling along the sand. Val turned and started running down the beach, away from the fire and madness. Alex looked at Butch.

He took her hand and they ran.

NINETEEN

Butch and Alex huddled close against a tree, while Val peered through the creepers down to the beach. No action. Again, Butch was struck by how tranquil this place was. A mysterious tropical paradise, except for the hoards of psychotic undead killers, of course. And how about their pal in the hockey mask? They hadn't seen him for a while, but he must be around somewhere. Butch wondered if there were any uninfected contestants left.

Since they had slowed down, all the pain in his battered body was starting to speak up louder than ever. The adrenaline was draining away, and Butch felt nauseous and shaky. Alex was having a hard time too, leaning heavily against the tree and appearing if she would collapse from heat stroke. It made him crazy that he couldn't do anything to help her, even though he knew she wouldn't want his help anyway. In all his years of keeping women at a distance, this green-eyed girl had snuck in effortlessly, without even trying. He could no longer deny that she had got under his skin, and the old, familiar terror of losing her was worse than the fear of his own death. It was the last thing he needed on his mind but it seemed he had no say in the matter.

"So," Val said. "Now what?"

Butch shook his head. "I don't know."

"We can't leave the island with these things on," Alex said, her hands following the shape of the camera rig.

"Well, we can't run forever either," Butch said.

"Give me that," Val said, taking the rifle from Alex and removing the magazine. "Great, only two bullets. That means if it comes down to that, one of us is gonna have to go out the hard way."

"You mean suicide?" Alex said. "I thought you didn't want to give up."

Val shrugged. "I won't be one of those things. I'll eat one of these fucking grenades first."

"Okay, look," Butch said. "What do we have in the way of weapons?"

"One machete," Val said, hefting the bloodstained blade. "One rifle with two rounds, that cable if you want to count that, and four grenades."

"That's pretty grim," Butch said. "I mean, say we take out three or even four of those creeps with each grenade, that still leaves way too fucking many of them and we don't even know how many more are coming up out of the water."

"We can get more weapons," Val said. "The infected soldiers have them but don't seem to remember how to use them."

"But how long can we keep this up?" Alex asked. "Fighting and running like this? This is a goddamn island. There's nowhere to run to. And I don't know about you guys, but I'm starting to get really hungry."

"She's right," Butch said. "We need food to keep our strength up."

"Yeah," Val said. "Lunch break."

She squatted down and turned over a large, rotten chunk of wood. Underneath, the wood was dotted with neat chambers. Each one contained a large white grub with a fat body and an ugly black head. Butch watched with horror and disbelief as Val knocked the grubs out of their holes with a stick and popped them into her mouth like cocktail weenies.

"I am not gonna eat those horrible worms," Alex said, looking more than a little green.

"That's right you won't," Val said, popping another one into her mouth. "You gotta find your own."

Butch pressed his lips together and swallowed hard. "We need to eat, Alex."

"Don't like it?" Val said, shrugging. "Go to Taco Bell." She turned over another log. "Here," Val said, poking around underneath. "Try some of these ant eggs." She picked up one of the pale ovoids. "Mmm, like caviar."

Butch pushed down on the sticks with a queasy feeling in his throat. Bigger than you'd think a tiny ant could make, he picked up one of the eggs closed his eyes and put it in his mouth. Intending to swallow it like a fat pill, the egg popped in his mouth and he was totally surprised by the taste. It really wasn't that bad at all. Warm

and creamy, kind of nutty tasting with a slightly bitter aftertaste, like biting into green wood.

"Not bad," Butch said, reaching for another.

"I am not eating any bugs," Alex said.

"Bug eggs," Val replied.

"Bugs, eggs, whatever," Alex crossed her large arms over her chest. "Forget it."

"Come on," Val said. "Don't be such a pussy. I bet you used to drink those gross protein shakes all the time, didn't you? Ground up pig placenta and purified bovine colostrums and all that junk. These ant eggs aren't half as nasty as those shakes."

Alex turned away, silent.

"Look." Val gestured to a nearby tree. "Those are cacao pods, you know. Chocolate, but don't eat the green ones or you'll get the runs."

Alex fell ravenously on the pointy oval fruits, smashing them open and scooping out the pulp and seeds.

"She's gonna have a stomach ache later," Val said to Butch, slipping another ant egg into her mouth. "But I won't say I told you so."

A sound echoed down the beach, a deep resonant boom.

Val turned, eyes wide. "Shotgun."

Alex dropped the pod she was eating and crouched down beside them. "Shotgun? That must mean someone is still alive."

"I didn't see any shotties back at that military encampment," Val said. "Must be newcomers. Maybe game officials?"

Butch remembered the frogmen he and Alex had seen creeping out of the surf the night before.

"Whoever it is, we need to find them," Alex said. "Maybe they can help us."

"Sure," Val said. "Just like those soldiers 'helped us'."

"We ought to check it out," Butch said. "Come on."

Butch headed down along the edge of the jungle, toward the sound. Alex followed close behind and Val made a loud, exasperated noise and then brought up the rear. When they rounded the curve of the island, their cameras frizzed out to static again. They saw a group of divers battling it out with a mixed gang of infected people,

including one of their biohazard-suited friends from the night before, and the heavy black woman from the show.

The divers all wore gloves, goggles and respirators to shield them from infection. They had a ton of equipment and seemed to know exactly what they were doing. They had already lost one of their number—his corpse laying headless at the tide line. Another went down as Butch watched; torn and bitten and fought over. The central diver, the one who seemed to be the leader, turned, kicked back the infected men and chopped off the stricken diver's head in a single fluid movement.

"Damn," Butch said softly. "Who the hell is this?"

"They aren't infected, that's for sure," Val said.

"Should we say something?" Alex asked.

"No," Val said. "We have no idea who they are."

A soldier crept out of the foliage behind them, one leg missing at the hip. It was more of a nuisance than a menace.

"Great," Val said, swinging the machete. "There's more."

The soldier's head rolled away from the twitching body and two more of his pals appeared, battling toward them throughout the tangled underbrush.

"Shit," Butch said.

"Fuck it," Alex said, slipping through the trees and down onto the beach.

"Goddammit!" Val cried, turning to follow Alex.

"Hey," Alex called. "Hey there."

Two gun barrels swung their way while the other two remaining divers held back the infected attackers.

"We're not infected," Alex said, waving her hands. "We're not infected!"

The divers lowered their guns and waved Alex over. Believing to be more secure with the divers than by themselves in the jungle, Butch and Val followed Alex.

"Contestants?" the leader of the group asked.

Although Butch was close enough to see the curves beneath the neoprene of the skin-tight dive suit, he was still surprised by the feminine voice. The leader was a woman. Butch could see that she

was black from the tiny stripe of exposed brown cheek between her mirrored goggles and her respirator but he could not make out any other details of her appearance.

"Yeah," Butch said. "I think we're the last ones left alive."

"Right," the woman said. "Have you seen Jason Voorhees?"

"Who?"

"Guy in a hockey mask." the woman said. "Tall, dark and ugly."

"He attacked me last night," Alex said. "But we haven't seen him since."

"Right," the woman said again.

She turned back toward the tree line. More infected soldiers were pouring out of the jungle, tearing toward them.

"Use the shotguns!" Val said. "What are you waiting for?"

"We don't want to attract anymore attention," the woman said. "Once was enough and look where it got us. I told my guys to try and keep it quiet. I don't want the military to know we're here."

Val gave a harsh laugh. "Honey," she said, gesturing to the crowd of infected soldiers. "This is the fucking military. There's nobody normal left on this damn island."

"Oh shit," one of the other divers said.

"What is it, Fischer?" the woman asked.

"It's..." the diver paused. "I think it's Banner."

He gestured with the shotgun barrel at a dripping wet infected man with bright red stubble on his torn-up head.

"Well," the woman said. "I suggest you skip the tearful reunion and blow his fucking head off."

"Yes, ma'am," the diver said, racking the shotgun.

Just as the guy was about to fire, one of the infected soldiers made a grab for the barrel of the gun. As the diver pulled the trigger reflexively, the blast blew apart one of the other diver's legs, obliterating it below the knee. The man screamed and crumpled to the ground.

"Fuck!" the diver with the shotgun said. "Kern, man... Fuck."

"All right, boys," the woman said. "We're taking it in the ass here. We need to locate our target and get the hell out of this nightmare."

She chopped first the arm and then the head off the infected soldier and kicked the body away, looking down at a large, watch-like device on her wrist.

"Good news and bad news," the woman said. "Bad news first."

The two remaining divers had a kind of team effort going. The one on the left took out the knees of the onrushing infected soldiers and his buddy would reload the shotgun and blow off their heads when they crawled into range.

"Bad news," the woman said. "Ladies and gentlemen, Jason has left the building. The tracking device installed by the first team has him under halfway to the mainland."

"What's the good news?" Butch asked.

"The good news," the woman replied, "is that we are fucking out of here!"

"Thank God," Alex said. "Where's your boat?"

The woman turned her expressionless, goggled face toward Alex.

"About five hundred yards out past the military ships," the woman said. "You three gear up. Hope you brought your PADI cards."

"Our what?" Alex asked, frowning.

"Great," the woman said. "Can you at least swim?"

Alex nodded. "Sure. But—"

"Okay, find suits that fit you first. Then we'll get you BCDs."

"We're gonna swim?" Butch asked.

"We're gonna dive," the woman replied

"But there are more of those infected freaks in the water!" Butch said, shuddering at the idea of being attacked underwater.

"There are infected freaks everywhere," the woman said. "They'll be on the mainland too pretty soon if you don't get suits and shut up."

"But what about our camera rigs?" Alex asked. "They'll blow our heads off if we leave the island."

"Not if you stay close to me," the woman said. "I have the scrambler here on my belt. It blocks the signal from the cameras within a fifty foot radius."

"Oh, boy," Val said.

Alex turned to the pile of dive equipment by the shoreline. There were masks and long fins and belts with little square metal blocks, but no suits.

"I don't see any suits," Alex said. The woman tilted her head toward the fallen divers.

"They won't be needing them."

Alex's eyes went wide.

"What? Are you squeamish?" The woman kicked back another headless zombie. "You can stay here if you prefer."

"No," Alex said, a queasy expression on her face, like when Val had offered her the ant eggs.

"Here," Butch said. "Let me help you."

While they were talking, Val had tossed one of her grenades out at the oncoming hoards. As the grenade exploded, Val dragged one of the dead divers into the water and stripped the wet suit off. She then strapped on a vest with a tank attached and slipped flippers onto her feet. She waited like an impatient wife while he and Alex wrestled the wet, sticky suits off the two biggest dead men. The biggest suit barely fit over Alex's bulging thighs, but it was too low in the crotch, loose on her waist and too long in the arms and legs. Beggars that they were, they had no choice. Butch's, on the other hand, was almost a perfect fit.

"Okay," the woman removed her goggles and respirator. Butch was amazed to discover that she was quite beautiful, with high, sculpted cheekbones and a slightly Asian shape to her dark eyes. "Everyone take a dive knife. We have no time for SCUBA 101 so we snorkel out until we lose the freak show and go from there. It's better that way anyway. We're gonna need every drop of air we've got to make it back to the boat."

She handed Butch and Alex two of the weird high-tech vests that had big tanks attached to the back and all sorts of hoses and things hanging off them. Alex could barely close hers over her breasts. The woman squinted at them, weighing the belts of metal squares in one hand. She handed a belt to each of them. They each had a mask with a clear plastic snorkel attached and a pair of fins, and that was all they had time for before the infected men started piling up on the

beach, coming close to overwhelming the other two divers. Val tossed two more grenades in quick succession, driving the infected back.

"Go," the woman said, pulling her own mask down over her eyes and nose. "Stay together. Keep your face in the water and your eyes peeled for infected freaks. We'll be right behind you."

Alex looked at Butch. Her pale green eyes were wide beneath the mask.

Butch was scared too. "Let's go," he said, hoping he sounded tougher than he felt.

TWENTY

Lindy Bloom paddled her board cautiously out into the smooth little barrels of Playa Uvita, struggling to keep her head up and her back slightly arched as she had been taught. She was lean and deeply tanned, with coppery sun bleached highlights in her dark brown hair and a wash of charcoal freckles across her sunburnt nose. Clad in a sleek, black rash guard, and red and white hibiscus patterned bikini bottoms, she knew that Drew and Rico were totally checking out her butt. She sucked in a deep breath and sprang to her feet, settling into her comfortable goofy-foot stance and gripping the waxy-rough surface of the board with her strong toes as she dropped in for an easy ride.

She had turned sixteen, and as a present for her birthday, her father had surprised her with this trip to Costa Rica. Imagining being stuck sulking under mosquito netting while her dad did boring geeky stuff like bird watching, she had been less than enthusiastic about the trip at first. That is, until he also revealed the gift certificate for a five day course at the Green Iguana Surf School in Dominical.

Her dad had laughed at first as his daughter became increasingly obsessed with surfing. Her skateboarding, he could deal with. It was dangerous and the skater boys she hung out with were a tattooed and raucous lot, but it was more urban, somehow. More New York. Her father, a lawyer and hardcore urbanite, had been born and raised in New York City. Why, he often wondered aloud, would a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn be interested in something so… Well, so blonde? But to Lindy, it was an inexplicable, driving fixation that started with a trip to Maui the year before and was cemented by the film *Blue Crush*, which she owned on DVD and watched nearly every day.

The sight, smell and feel of the Pacific Ocean had moved her like nothing in her previous fifteen years ever had. It was as if her life in the steel and cement canyons of New York City was some dull distant dream and Lindy only came alive with the salt wind in her hair and the sand between her toes. She plastered the walls of her room with posters of the female surfers she idolized: Marge Calhoun, Eve

Fletcher Rips, Keala Kennelly and Layne Beachley. She filled her iPod with surf sounds from Dick Dale and Link Wray, The Aquabats and Los Straightjackets. As she threw cocky lipslides and dropped back into the eight-foot bowl at the Millennium skate park out in Bay Ridge, she'd close her eyes, and for a split second, she would picture herself dropping into a flawless, turquoise pipe and riding that blue beast right off into the sunset. It was as if skating had been nothing but a gateway drug, a warm-up act. Riding concrete was tough, but predictable. That lip was gonna be exactly the same every time she hit it. The ocean was alive, in flux, moving and changing with every heartbeat. It had rhythms but it could turn on you with no warning. You could break your neck on the concrete too, but somehow the danger of the ocean seemed almost sexy. Like a lover who liked to get rough but always left you wanting more.

Lindy had attempted sexual encounters exactly three times in her young life—lame, sticky fumblings with overeager skater boys who all seemed to blow it right when she was starting to enjoy herself. None of them made her feel anything even close to the way she felt about the ocean. It was almost spiritual in its crush-like intensity. She felt as if she had been waiting her whole life for the moment.

She was doing it. She was really surfing, like in her dreams. Sure, maybe it was baby waves, but soon she'd be hitting the big ones right alongside the more advanced students like Rico and that cute Aussie, Drew.

Her mind was awash with hazy golden fantasies: of moving to Maui after graduation, Drew putting sunscreen on her and catching a big one as she paddled back out again. Lindy watched a nice incoming set of three coiling toward her with mathematical precision, when out of nowhere, something slammed into her board like a mack truck, knocking her awkwardly sideways and into the face of an incoming wave.

Tossed and twisted beneath the water, Lindy was struggling to orient herself when she felt a powerful tug on her leash, dragging her by the ankle swiftly away from the shore. Something had a hold of her board and was taking off like a jet ski. Her face broke the surface as she fought to disconnect her ankle cuff, sky and ocean trading

places over and over. Then, without warning, a large chunk of her board popped out of the water with the leash still attached, smacking her in the face. She sputtered and coughed, clutching the pizza box-sized fragment to her chest. She could see Drew, Rico and her instructor Jaime screaming and waving their arms hysterically on the beach, but she could not hear them. She then saw Jaime point to her left and made the universal hand sign that struck instant terror into the heart of any surfer or diver. A single hand turned sideways and held up to the forehead.

Shark.

The fear that gripped her was so total, so primal that she was literally paralyzed, frozen with her knees tucked up into her chest as if she could make all of her body beneath the surface of the water disappear. She couldn't see anything. Where was it? Maybe they're wrong, she thought.

Then she saw it. Eleven feet long, though it looked like fifty, the snub-nosed and stocky bull shark was heading right for her. The water was so clear she could see its cold, tiny eyes. It didn't even look real.

She wanted more than anything to haul ass, to get away, but she couldn't seem to make her muscles obey her. In the extremity of her terror, she felt warm urine leak from her body into the salt water around her.

Can it smell me, she wondered? Maybe if I remain still...

She squeezed her eyes shut and waited to die. What happened was so unbelievable that she could not wrap her mind around what she was seeing. Just as the shark had circled around for a second pass, a man burst up out of the water beside it, gripping it by the fin and sinking a huge knife into its muscular gray back.

What the hell kind of scuba gear is that, Lindy wondered? She frowned at her savior's white facemask. It looked like a hockey mask. And that wasn't a wetsuit. They were raggedy, regular clothes; dull dark pants and a rough work shirt like a janitor might wear. But despite his oddball taste in beachwear, the guy was locked in a furious battle with the enormous bull shark. It had clamped its jaws around one arm and shook it furiously, but it didn't stop the guy

from hacking into the shark, splitting open its snout and slashing at its gills. They rolled over and over together, plunging the masked man into the water again and again. He jammed the knife into the shark's pale underbelly and the surf turned red with blood and warm gore, splashing Lindy's face. Soft loops of floating intestine brushed against her and she felt sure she was going to puke or pass out, but she still could not seem to make herself move. All she could do was watch, horrified, as the masked man gripped the shark's lower jaw, seemingly unmindful of the razor sharp teeth that dug into his palm, and ripped the entire jaw free from the shark's head.

Mortally wounded, the shark sank, twitching to the sandy bottom. The man turned to Lindy and she could see that during the furious battle, they had floated close enough to the shore for him to stand with his head and shoulders above the water. He looked at her with his masked face cocked slightly to one side and the bloody shark jaw clenched in his hand. Gory tatters of flesh hung from the jaw as he held it out to her, like some kind of weird offering

"You," she whispered, her voice all but gone. "You saved my life."

Suddenly, her paralysis broke and she threw grateful arms around her savior. He smelled pretty rank, but she guessed that was probably all the shark guts and gore that were splattered all over him. He looked at her quizzically, like he had never been hugged before and wasn't entirely sure what she was doing.

She saw Drew and Jamie charging into the waves, running out to meet her.

"I'm okay!" she called, waving with one arm still slung around her savior's neck. "I'm all right."

That's when her savior brought the bloody shark jaw down on her like a guillotine. She felt the triangular, razor-sharp teeth slice into the flesh of her face and, more horribly, into the delicate jelly of her left eye. White-hot pain erased all conscious thought and she sucked in a breath to scream when the masked man jammed his machete into the soft spot beneath her sternum. Her body went into violent convulsions and she was consumed by bottomless rage and fury as Drew and Jamie reached her.

"Oh my God, Lindy," Drew said.

He might have said more, but she was on him like a shark, biting deep into his left cheek before he could finish his sentence. In less than a minute, Jamie was also infected. A small crowd of curious Ticos and gawking tourists had gathered around the shoreline, eager to find out what all the excitement was about. They found out.

It was not pretty.

TWENTY-ONE

Alex had never felt so small in her life. The woman who seemed to be in charge had shown Alex how to fill the vest up with air like a life preserver, and all six of them floated in a tight cluster in the middle of the vast wide ocean. Alex was horribly aware of the huge amount of space below them. What was it, twenty, forty, eighty feet down? And it was not empty space beneath her dangling legs. It was a living ocean, every square foot packed with hungry critters of all sizes, all sizing up the tasty meat of her thick, juicy calves.

They seemed to have lost the infected soldiers, though who knew there were more clustered down on the sea floor beneath them. Could they swim, or bumble along the bottom? Alex guessed they would find out soon enough, once they went under.

Under—that normal, totally unremarkable word—took on a most sinister resonance in light of what they were about to do. Alex was glad she was not the only one who had never done this before. Of course Val knew how, since she apparently knew how to do everything, but Butch had never done this either and she could tell that he was as scared as she was. For some strange reason, that made her feel better about the whole thing. She struggled to absorb every detail as the woman explained how the complicated equipment worked, which number showed how deep you were and what dial showed how much air you had left. How to pinch your nose through the mask and pop your ears, like on an airplane. It was all so much to take in, with so much riding on it, that Alex could barely breathe up on the surface. She did not know how she would survive, she only knew she had no choice.

"Okay," the woman said. "First of all, always keep me in your line of sight. Things might get crazy down there but if you get too far away from the scrambler... Well, you know..."

Alex shuddered.

"You won't be able to talk or call out if you're in trouble, so here are the hand signals I want you to use. This one's obvious."

She made the okay sign with her fingers.

"If one of us wants to know how you are doing, we're gonna make this sign and if you're okay you make it back. Get it?"

Alex and Butch nodded. Val rolled her eyes like the bad, rebellious girl in the back of the high school classroom.

"If you're not okay," Stella continued, ignoring Val, "I want you to do this."

She made a seesawing motion with her hand like when you say something is only so-so.

"Got it? And if you're running out of air."

She made a throat-cutting motion across her neck that made Alex feel a little sick. They weren't going to need that signal, were they? The thought of running out of air eighty feet underwater made her throat tight and her palms sweaty.

"And if you're in serious trouble, do this."

She raised her hand above her head and waved her arm from side to side.

Serious trouble, Alex thought? More serious than running out of air? Maybe this whole diving thing wasn't such a good idea.

"I want each of you to buddy with one of us," the woman said. "Names?"

The way she said it, so sudden and terse like that, Alex almost didn't understand that she was asking their names until Butch said his out loud.

"I'm Alex," Alex replied. "That's Val."

Val was floating back slightly, looking sullen. She nodded when Alex said her name.

"Right," the woman said. "That's Tig and Larry." She pointed to her two remaining men. Tig was thin and intense, black but light skinned. Larry was beefier and white, with thinning blond hair and a lantern jaw. "And I'm Stella."

The absurdity of this formal introduction struck Alex as preposterously funny and she had to suppress a giggle.

"I want Butch with Tig, Alex with Larry." Stella turned to Val. "Val, you're with me."

"No way," Val said. "I'm with Larry."

Stella frowned. "I'm the leader of this outfit and I don't have time to babysit. I want Larry with one of the tadpoles. You don't need him."

"Fuck you," Val said. "I'm with Larry or I'm alone. You ain't my leader."

"For Christ sake, Val," Butch said. "This is no time for your racist bullshit."

"Fine," Stella said. "We don't have time to argue so I guess I'm with Alex. I don't want to be responsible for your dumb white ass anyway."

"What about my dumb white ass?" Alex asked.

Something about the dire seriousness of the situation had short-circuited Alex's funny bone and she was no longer able to keep from laughing out loud. There was a good chance that some, if not all of them were going to die before they made it to the boat, but Alex had almost died too many times in the last twenty-four hours to do anything but laugh. Stella smiled and Butch snickered and even the other two divers were chuckling softly. Only Val remained serious.

"Cut the comedy," Val said. "Let's do this if we're doing it."

"All right," Stella said. "Here's the plan. We go down here and come up on the other side of those military ships." She pointed out to the floating gray armada surrounding the island. "Newbies, we don't have time to teach you what's safe and what isn't, so don't touch anything. Try not to bump into any corals or anemones and stay away from holes or caves. The bottom here is pretty uniform at thirty feet until after the ships and then there's a hell of a shelf where it drops off to one fifty. I want everyone staying at thirty all the way, which means about two hundred yards of midwater for the last neck of the dive. Newbies, stay close and I mean touching close. It's easy to get disoriented in midwater, understand? And remember midwater is where the big cruisers hunt. I'm talking hammerheads, kids, so keep your eyes open. Stay aware and stay cool. They often travel in schools so if you see one chances are he brought twenty friends."

Alex felt a cold coil of fear in her guts. Hammerhead sharks? Jesus.

"And remember, the more scared you get, the quicker you're gonna use up your air, so staying cool isn't to impress the ladies, it's a matter of life and death. There's about a ton more really critical shit that you need to know, but frankly, we are out of time so stay cool and stay close."

Stella put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "You remember how to clear the water out of your mask like I showed you?"

Alex nodded, heart pounding. She turned to Butch but he was over by Tig, his back to her. She was appalled by how badly she wanted to stay near Butch. She clenched her jaw.

"Yeah," Alex said. "I'm ready."

Stella nodded. "Okay then. Let's go down."

***

After the slow, strange drop to the bottom, letting air out of her vest a little at a time and pinching her nose to blow out the pressure in her head, Alex hovered above the fantastical, impossible landscape of a billion surreal and glorious corals, some big as trees, some low and humpbacked, each one more amazing than the last. Tiny jewel-colored fish swam fearlessly up to her mask, like curious fairies. It was so breathtakingly beautiful that Alex almost forgot why they were there. She could have spent the whole dive floating in that one spot, mesmerized. All her fear seemed to have bubbled up out of her like the shimmering silver bubbles from her mouthpiece. She was starting to drift after a big showy fish the size of a dinner plate when she felt a firm grip on her wrist.

It was Stella. Her eyes were wide beneath her mask, but it was hard to read her expression with her lips pouted out around the regulator. She pointed at Alex and made the okay sign. Alex made the same sign back. Stella nodded and touched Alex's chest and then her own and pointed to the right. Stella hadn't mentioned this signal, but Alex assumed she meant the two of them should go that way. She turned to follow Stella and started swimming.

Alex had a hard time trying to make herself buoyant enough not to scrape her belly on the stinging corals on the sea floor, but not so

much so that she started to drift upward. She didn't want to waste air puffing up and deflating her vest over and over so she decided to concentrate on swimming. Her strong legs pushed her easily through the water and she had no trouble keeping up with Stella.

She could see Butch and Tig to the left but a little didn't see Val and Larry. She figured they must be close behind. She was trying to look everywhere at once when a sleek gray shape appeared out of the blue haze. Alex felt a chilly flush of fear in her gut and clenched her fists, eyes wide as she came to a slow stop in the water. It was a shark, about her size with a skinny snout and flashy white tips on its fins. It circled once around their group and Alex found herself gripping Stella's arm like a child at a horror movie. Stella tapped Alex hard in the chest and gave her the okay sign. Alex got the feeling that she was not asking if Alex was okay; she was telling Alex to be okay.

Alex tried to slow her breathing and returned the okay sign, even though she did not feel even remotely okay. She had lost sight of the shark, but then saw it again on her far right. To her tremendous relief, it turned away with a flick of its muscular tail and took off. Alex let out long slow breath and let her fists open. With the fear gone, she suddenly realized that she was getting awfully cold. There was a deep, penetrating chill in the water that seeped into her bones as she swam. But then Stella held up her fist and everyone stopped and Alex forgot all about the cold.

Stella was pointing ahead of them, where a natural dip in the ocean floor formed something like an irregularly shaped amphitheater. Above was the huge, gray belly of a military ship. The area beneath the ship was littered with bodies. Most of them were still moving, some better than others. None of them really seemed to be able to swim, so they mostly flailed around on the bottom, stirring up the silt. As they watched, several more bodies came drifting down, twitching and shuddering as they spiraled toward the bottom. Most wore what was left of military gear, heavy belts, boots and helmets that dragged them down as their Kevlar filled up with brine. The squirming bodies were strewn almost as far as the eye could see in both directions like some nightmare landscape of hell in a Hieronymus Bosch painting.

Stella pointed up with one finger and then flashed the palm of her right hand, closed it to a fist and flashed them again. Alex had no idea what she meant, but the other two divers seemed to get it because they nodded, each grabbing their respective charge. Stella grabbed Alex and pointed up again, then made the okay sign. Alex got it, but didn't understand why Stella wanted to go up when there was a ship full of infected soldiers above them, but you can't argue underwater so she returned the okay sign and filled her vest with a few puffs of air, following Stella as she rose.

They had only ascended about ten feet when Stella stopped them. They all hung there for a minute while everyone was accounted for. Stella then signaled them to swim forward, into the thick of the infected soldiers. Alex thought she was crazy, but she saw that as the bottom dipped down beneath them, the infected men on the sea floor could not seem to figure out how to swim up to reach them. They reached impotently upward, bumping into each other and turning around and around in the murky silt. The six of them were almost half way across and Alex was sure they were going to fly right over the heads and hands of the infected soldiers when a massive explosion resonated through the water, pushing them down dangerously close to the reaching hands. Luckily the same blast also flattened the infected soldiers down into the muck on the bottom.

Alex looked up with horror as orange bursts of flame and silver bubbles bloomed from the bottom of the ship, and the front of the vessel began to sag. Dozens more bodies dropped into the water above them, raining down all around them. A young woman in camouflage fatigues made a swipe at Alex, gripping one of her flippers. Alex shook her foot to kick the woman loose. The woman's face was hideous, lips torn away from the teeth and eyes bulging. Her blonde hair was held back in a French braid that had come partially undone, freeing seaweed-like tendrils all around the bloody rictus on her face. Alex kicked her away and the woman spun in dreamy slow motion, down and to the left, out of reach.

The ship above them was sinking, more than halfway under, and they were going to have to make a hard detour to the right or it was coming down right on top of them. They swam as fast as they could.

Alex was trying not to look back, but she could not help herself. She was caught up in the mesmerizing horror of the falling bodies, still animated horribly as they drifted down, and of the sinking bulk of the ship, still flaming in parts, even under water. It slid past ten feet behind them, crushing hundreds of squirming infected soldiers beneath its massive weight as it hit the bottom. The sudden, muscular gush of the displaced water pushed them forward at an alarming rate.

Alex was completely disoriented and turned around. She had no idea which way they were headed but she followed Stella like a dog, unwilling to let her guardian out of her sight even for a minute. Alex saw Val coming up quick on the left until she was nearly beside her, when, out of nowhere, a falling soldier bodyslammed Val from above, driving her downward, toward the reaching hands.

Alex saw Val falling and kicking and had a sudden uncharitable vision of Val running away with the handcuff keys. It would be suicide to go down after her. She wouldn't have done it for them. They ought to let the bitch die.

Then, to Alex's surprise, Stella drew a speargun from her shoulder and swam down after Val without a second of hesitation. Larry followed and beckoned that they should too. At first, Alex refused to go down into that nightmare melee, but then she remembered that Stella had the scrambler that kept Alex's head from exploding. She cursed into her regulator, but it came out as more bubbles. Butch and Tig were close by and Tig flashed the okay symbol. Butch okayed back, and because she didn't appear to have a choice, Alex signaled that she was okay too. Together the three of them went down after Val.

TWENTY-TWO

Marty and Sara Dixon had been married six days, seventeen hours and thirty-two minutes. Needless to say, they could not keep their hands off each other. They had met online six months ago and fallen head over heels in love instantly, as if simply resuming a conversation that had been interrupted by some minor annoyance. They were already finishing each other's sentences by the end of the first night they spent together.

He was a Web designer and she was an artist moonlighting as a barista in a trendy coffee shop. He was tall and skinny with clunky glasses and a sweet, bashful smile. She was short and curvy with curly red hair chopped into a sort of punky take on the classic Clara Bow bob. She was fond of strange barrettes and had a large collection, shaped like shoes, guitars, guns and vegetables. They were both twenty-six, born only two hours apart on the same day. They had an almost twin-like affinity that sometimes seemed to border on psychic.

They had spent the first three days of their Costa Rican honeymoon in bed, leaving only when utterly famished and unable to put off eating for another second. Over dinner in the tiny restaurant at the Perezozo Loco resort where they were staying, Sara had laughingly said that she was finally putting her foot down, that they had to do something besides have sex, or they might as well have saved the money and stayed back home in Seattle. Before Marty could drag her back to bed, they went up to the desk and registered for the first activity they found: a bird watching hike through Manuel Antonio national park.

When the alarm had gone off to wake them for the hike, they almost didn't make it out of bed. Sara had to hit Marty with a pillow and lock herself in the bathroom to get dressed, while he whined at the door like a dog and made bad jokes about battering rams. She clipped her new toucan barrettes into her wild hair, slicked her body with sunscreen and bug repellent and buttoned her decidedly unsexy shirt all the way up to the neck before she felt safe to let him in.

So, whether they liked it or not, they were out of the hotel and in the breathtakingly wild jungle they had come to Costa Rica for in the first place. It was incredible, and though Sara wasn't really much of a bird watcher, she was utterly blown away by the beauty and variety of birds they saw at every turn. Not to mention the butterflies, lizards, sloths, flowers and a billion other amazing things.

But, as time wore on, Marty and Sara started to lag behind. The other three people on the hike, two women and a man, seemed serious about the whole thing, writing down every bird they saw and getting tremendously excited about birds that didn't even really look all that interesting to Sara. Plus Marty kept doing that thing that made her crazy-sliding his fingers up the groove on the back of her neck into her hair, giving her chills in spite of the heat. The three others and the guide, a friendly older Tico named Manuel (like the park, he told them), were enthusing about some sort of tufted whatever further up the path, but Marty had his mouth on the back of her neck and she turned and kissed him, pressing the length of her body against him.

Before she knew it, he had her shirt unbuttoned down to her navel, exposing her small, sensitive breasts, teasing her nipples with his tongue and making her forget all of Manuel's earnest warnings about poisonous snakes, ants and spiders. She thought for a moment that they better catch up, that it could be dangerous to be left behind, but, having had that good, wise, rational thought, she abandoned herself utterly to the wonderful sensations racing through her body. She slid her hands down under the waistband of Marty's shorts and he gasped softly into her ear.

"Baby," Marty said, laughing and pushing her back a few precious inches. "I think someone's coming."

Sara flashed a challenging smile and started to undo the buttons on her cargo pants.

"Let 'em watch," she said, sliding her pants and white cotton thong down over her thighs, revealing her bright red pubic hair and pale, freckled ass.

Marty pulled her close and started kissing her again, gripping her tight with one hand and fumbling to open the fly on his shorts with

the other. As he thrust suddenly into her she tossed her head back and closed her eyes, biting back a cry of pleasure. Head still hanging back, she opened her eyes again and saw an upside down view of something so odd that for a second, she didn't even realize what she was seeing. There was a bloody man standing behind her. He seemed to be wearing a hockey mask.

If there was more to that thought, it vanished as a huge, bloodstained machete whistled inches past her nose and then there was nothing but hot wet redness everywhere, blinding her. Marty's full weight fell forward onto her, knocking her backward into the dirt.

She wiped furiously at her eyes and when she could see again, she screamed.

Marty's head was missing, leaving only a clean sheared stump of neck about an inch from the collar of the expensive moisture-wicking microfiber shirt, which she had bought him especially for the trip. She would have screamed again, but she was silenced by the fall of the machete.

***

Manuel had spotted the darting blue shape of a mielero luciente ahead and pointed it out to his charges. It took him a second to recall the English name, but by the time it formed in his mind, one of the women had exclaimed in an excited whisper.

"Honeycreeper!"

"Is that the shining honeycreeper?" the other woman asked.

Manuel nodded. That was it. Shining honeycreeper . He set up the scope and centered it on the cocky and preening male. The shorter of the two women came over to peer through the scope while the other continued to watch through her binoculars. The man stood back and seemed far more interested in watching the woman's ass as she bent to look into the scope than watching the bird Manuel had pointed out. It made no real difference to Manuel. She was pretty, but it seemed fairly obvious that she and her blonde companion were more than friends. Manuel had been happily married for twenty-one years.

He had more important things to think about than unattainable young girls. Like making sure that all his charges were safe and together.

Manuel looked back down the path and saw that the newlyweds were nowhere to be found. Foolish gringos, he'd told them a hundred times to stay close. Smiling indulgently, Manuel thought of what it had been like when he and Elvia were newlyweds. He would not have had much interest in watching birds back then either. Still, they were foreigners and did not understand the jungle like he did. Manuel needed to go back to round them up.

A harsh shriek resonated through the trees and Manuel turned toward the sound, alert and coldly focused.

"Was that a monkey?" the man asked.

Manuel shook his head. He did not want to scare them so he tried to keep his voice steady.

"Wait here," he said. "I will be back."

He ran back down the path toward the noise, but as he rounded the curve, his feet slipped in slick red mud and he staggered sideways, and almost fell on top of his two stray newlyweds. Their heads had been severed cleanly. The man's head lay further down the path, facing mercifully away as if looking at his own glasses where they lay a few feet beyond. The redheaded girl's head was right beside her body, resting on its crown, slack, upside-down face and dead, staring eyes pointed right at Manuel. One of her cute toucan hair clips had fallen out and was crushed in the center of a large footprint.

Manuel crossed himself and backed away, horrified. He needed to get the others to safety and contact the police right away. This was no animal attack. Manuel had a machete in his own belt and he immediately recognized this brutal murder as the work of a human animal.

He turned to run, planning in his mind how to get his group back to the parking area without passing the bodies of their fellow tourists, when he ran full force into something unyielding. For a split second, he had the crazy notion that a new tree had somehow sprouted in the middle of the path. It was not a tree, it was the Devil.

The Devil looked nothing like Manuel might have imagined, but the cold waves of silent hatred and profound, unnatural evil pouring off his huge frame made it clear that this bloody masked creature could be no less than Satan himself. When Manuel was a boy, his mother used to warn him that the Devil stalked through the jungle in search of boys who were bad and did not respect their parents. He had ignored her warnings and snuck out with friends to smoke stolen cigarettes and listen to rock and roll music on his best friend's tiny radio. Later, when he started working as a tour guide, he came to know the jungle like his own house, intimately familiar with all its denizens. He knew every danger from the shy and elusive big cats to the deadly terciopelo, but he had never come across his mother's Devil. With his mother fifteen years in her grave, Manuel realized that she had been horribly right.

He spun away from that hateful mask with no other thought than to run, to get away. He forgot his group, forgot everything in the extremity of his fear. He got no more than three steps when the Devil reached out and grabbed the strap of Manuel's binoculars.

Manuel felt his feet leave the ground and the strap cinched tight around his throat, choking him as the Devil wrenched it tighter and tighter, cutting off his air. Red spangles danced around the edges of Manuel's vision as he fought for air, clutching helplessly at the strap.

I'm sorry, Mama, he thought. I'm sorry I was bad. Then the strap broke, and Manuel tumbled down, falling awkwardly forward and head first into an ancient tree.

He rapped his head hard against the bark and sagged sideways against the trunk, dazed. A thick, musky odor filled his nostrils, accompanied by loud, agitated clicking, and the fear he felt as he looked into the masked face of the Devil. It was nothing compared to what he felt when he realized where he had fallen.

Horrible stabs of pain shot through his arm to the shoulder, a fierce numbing agony filling him. He screamed and pushed himself up and away. It was too late. He had no trouble at all remembering the English name for his attackers, as he was stung again and again, peppered with unbearable agony like the hot lead spray of a machine gun. Bullet ants.

As the tiny predators crawled furiously over his face and arms, blinding him with pain, Manuel jittered and danced in an agonized frenzy. When he felt the Devil's bloody machete rip open his belly, emptying him of organs in a single swipe, Manuel was almost grateful. But the pain did not end. Clearly he was in hell, being punished for every sin he'd ever committed. The oblivion of death was cruelly snatched away, replaced instead with a boiling, rabid fury unlike any he had ever known.

***

Bob Hinderly decided to go on the bird watching hike when he saw those two hot dykes sign up the night before. He had spotted them at the pool when he first checked in at the Perezozo Loco. One was dark, leggy with big tits and a face like that pop slut that did the song about wanting to be your wind up toy. ("Wind me up, wind me up, baby...") She was dressed in a smoking hot bikini that left nothing to the imagination, like three guitar picks on strings, and looked like she'd probably had more hands on her than a doorknob. The other girl was blonde and fit with a sleek, athletic build. Not much in the tit department, but a dynamite ass and legs like a marathon runner. She wore little short-shorts that snuggled right up the crack of that fabulous ass and a strapless top that was barely more than that black stripe that blocks the nipples in censored photos.

He had been ogling them separately and when he saw the blonde one give the dark haired one's ass an affectionate squeeze while she wrapped a towel around her shoulders, his interest went from mild ogling to serious stalking. He followed them back to their cabina, hoping to maybe catch some girl on girl action, but all the windows were covered. He was pretty sure that he could hear little girly noises coming from the back of the cabina, but then he heard his wife Michelle calling him—the suffocating bitch—and he had to go back and pay attention to whatever bullshit problem she had invented to keep everyone focused on her.

Bob knew that Michelle would be hungover and did not want to get up to go on a four hour hike at seven in the morning, so he would be

free to do his own kind of "bird watching".

At the beginning of the hike, when they all introduced themselves, Bob learned that the cute one was named Annie and the blonde was named Cheryl. They were from San Francisco (he could have guessed that) and it was obvious that the blonde was the man in their relationship. She barely let the little hottie brunette out of her sight for a second. Not that Bob could blame her. That Annie was clearly trouble and in need of some serious supervision. Even in loose fitting khakis and a roomy button-down shirt, there was no hiding that saucy bod. It was also obvious that the blonde did not like Bob one bit. She was probably one of those man-hating feminist types.

What a waste.

Since the guide had left them, the two girls twittered over the image in the scope. They were making notes on their little matching pads. Bob stood back and pretended to be looking up at the canopy through his binoculars, but whenever he could get away with it, he would zoom in on the blonde's camel toe or the brunette's nipples.

"Is that an antshrike?" Cheryl asked, swinging the scope to the right and focusing down.

"Where?" Annie asked, lifting her binoculars to her eyes and peering up in the direction that her girlfriend had indicated.

Bob had focused back in on Annie's nipples when a sudden spray of crimson gushed over the front of her shirt. Bob dropped the binoculars from his eyes and gasped. A huge machete had neatly bisected Annie's binoculars through the center hinge and embedded itself deep in her face.

Blood gushed in a V-shaped spray around the massive blade. The two halves of her binoculars fell on either side of the wound, still attached by the strap. A hulking man in dark dirty clothes and a gore-splattered hockey mask appeared from between the mossy trunks of two giant trees and reached for the machete. Annie staggered back as the blade was pulled free from her face and stumbled on the edge of the trail, falling down over the embankment and disappeared from view.

Cheryl screamed Annie's name and threw herself down on the ground on the embankment's edge, reaching down after her

girlfriend. Jason lunged toward Cheryl, raising the machete high. As he brought the blade down, Cheryl rolled out of the way so that the machete sank into the dirt inches from her ear. She grabbed the leg of the tripod that held the scope.

"Don't stand there," Cheryl yelled to Bob, blocking the masked man's machete with the scope. "Help, Annie! She's still alive down there! I saw her moving."

The scope broke off the mount and bounced away, shattered glass spraying across Bob's path. He probably ought to help the cute girl, or better yet run away, but he was frozen in abject terror, watching in disbelief as the furious blonde swung the tripod at her attacker. Jason countered with the machete, shearing the tripod in half and leaving her holding a single leg. He thrust at her with the blade, aiming for her heart, and she threw herself to the left, jamming the broken end of the tripod leg into her attacker's exposed right side. The masked man grabbed her wrist and wrenched upward, making her let go of the tripod leg. He did not seem at all disturbed by the broken tripod leg sticking out between his ribs. Instead, he swung the machete and chopped off Cheryl's arm.

Cheryl screamed and fell back, convulsing on the ground and the masked man put an enormous boot on the center of her chest, holding her down as he pulled the tripod leg from his side in a dark, unhealthy spurt of noxious fluid. She kicked and struggled, clutching at his pant leg with her one remaining hand. Unfazed, he hefted the tripod leg and sank it into her right eye.

The eyeball burst in a gelid gush and he leaned on the tripod leg, pushing it through her brain, out the back of her skull and deep into the ground beneath her.

Her convulsions increased exponentially until her body was arching almost completely off the ground like an electroshock patient. She could not possibly survive a wound like that, but she would not die. She twitched and flailed, and, after going still for a handful of seconds, started to get up, making low, wet growling noises in her throat and scrabbling at the metal pole pinning her head to the dirt.

Jason stood watching Cheryl with his head slightly cocked to one side, but when he turned to face Bob, Bob's paralysis broke and he ran.

That murderous freak must have been right behind him, but Bob didn't dare look back. He had blundered off the trail and didn't even know what direction he was headed. He didn't care, so long as it was away from that masked maniac. The heat was suffocating and he felt close to passing out. Finally he staggered to a stop, hands on his knees and gasping for breath. He listened for the sound of pursuit and wondered if he had lost the creep. That was when he became aware of a peculiar smell.

It was a musky, vile stench, combined with a butcher's shop undertone. And there was a weird sound too, a kind of furious clicking. He spun around and saw Manuel, their erstwhile guide.

Manuel's eyes were almost popping out of his head, weeping tears of blood. His belly was slashed open, globs of thick yellow fat and glistening organs twisted between his legs. Worse, if anything could be worse than that, he was covered with inch-long dark red and bristly ants. They swarmed over his face and his reaching hands, walking across the bloody surfaces of his huge bloated eyeballs and crawling in and out of his wide, contorted mouth. They lined the gash in his belly, excising neat chunks of his exposed organs with huge mandibles. Bob screamed as Manuel reached out and grabbed his wrist. A horrible, white-hot pain rocketed through his arm. He thought for a second that someone had shot him, that there must be police or something, but that thought and every other one was soon swallowed in a tidal wave of the most intense unimaginable agony that washed away everything else.

TWENTY-THREE

When they swam down and reached Val, she had cut the soldier's throat and slashed at his face again and again with her dive knife, but she could not get enough leverage to cut his head off. Blood billowed out into the water and Alex cringed, fearing contamination, but she had no open wounds so she had to grit her teeth and hope for the best. She was disgusted by how good the warm blood felt in the chilly water.

There was really nothing more Val could do but keep the teeth and hands away from her face and try to stay above the sea of reaching hands below. Stella slammed the infected soldier in the face with her elbow and when his head rocked back she let him have it in the forehead with the speargun. To Alex's amazement, the tip of the spear exploded, blowing the soldier's head into bloody rags. The body spasmed and went down, but the ones below were reaching, jumping and clutching. One of them got a hold of one of Stella's flippers. She yanked her leg free, losing the flipper in the process, and made the okay sign to Val. Alex thought Val was going to swim away, but she made the okay sign back to Stella.

There was a blur of motion to Alex's right. She turned to see Larry struggling with an infected soldier who was trying to climb up his leg like a monkey. Larry drove his dive knife into the soldier's huge swollen eye and it burst in a cloud of blood. Out of nowhere, something hit the infected soldier like a speeding car, dragging him away. Alex saw the long sleek body, the powerful tail, with blood trailing through the water behind. It was another shark, this one almost double the size of the first one. She looked back over her shoulder and saw something so awesome and terrifying that it stole her breath and froze her to the bone.

Hammerheads. They filled the water all the way up to the surface with their distinctive chubby T-shaped silhouettes, circling in a vortex as they fought over the bodies of the infected soldiers. They had not been there seconds ago, but now they were everywhere, as if they had appeared out of the blue haze like demons called up by

some malevolent magic. Alex was filled with a paralyzing terror as one of the huge, magnificent predators headed straight for her, only to turn inexplicably away at the last minute like some horrible game of chicken. Instead of killing Alex, it dived down and ripped the arm off one of the infected soldiers below, slamming Alex in the ribs with its powerful tail as it passed. The tail was all rock hard muscle and felt like a blow from an aluminum baseball bat covered in sandpaper. It knocked the wind out of Alex and she folded up into a clenched c-shape of pain.

When she looked up again, someone was fighting furiously against a smaller hammerhead that had locked onto a calf and was shaking it, body lashing back and forth. When the bleeding diver hauled back and punched the shark so hard that one side of its hammer-shaped head snapped like a broken wing, Alex knew it was Butch and burst of adrenaline pushed her through the water to his side. She grabbed his wrist and made the okay sign. He looked up at her, eyes wide behind his mask, and made the so-so sign, clutching his bleeding calf.

Was he infected? Was the blood in the water too diluted? Was the water too salty? Or was he going to start puking into his regulator and then try to kill her? Alex looked around desperately for Stella and saw a pair of huge sharks tear into the smaller one with the broken head. There was so much blood and silt and shredded flesh in the water that it was hard to see. Shark blood, Butch's blood and the infected blood too. She could barely read her air gauge holding it right up to her mask. She had twelve minutes of air left. Butch had only ten. She held tight to Butch's hand and wondered if he would turn psychotic on her before they could be eaten or ran out of air. Or maybe one of the sharks would carry Stella too far away and their heads would explode.

When Stella grabbed Alex's shoulder, the woman's grip was so fierce, Alex thought she had been bitten. She turned with a startled gasp and almost lost her regulator. When she saw Stella, the relief that washed over her made her feel sick. Stella had only one flipper and pointed urgently to the left and gestured for them to follow her. Alex could see two other divers right behind her but couldn't tell who

they were. One of them was leaking swirls of blood from their right side, but acted normal. When Alex looked down, she saw the third diver. Whoever it was had got too low and was being savaged by the infected soldiers on the bottom. There was a wild spiral of bubbles as the loose regulator spun around and around on the end of its hose.

Alex swam, concentrating on nothing, but pushing through the water as fast as she could. Then there was a slight rise in the sea floor and the bottom dropped away into darkness vertiginously. She stopped and reached out to grab Stella like a superstitious pagan, nearly overwhelmed with a profoundly primitive fear of the abyss beneath. Behind them was the churning hell of blood and death, and ahead, terrifyingly endless blue. Stella gave Alex the stern okay sign again and Alex forced her shaking hand to make it back.

Swimming in midwater was like flying through hazy blue nothingness, occasionally broken by flashes of shimmering silver as they passed through schools of fish. Alex sometimes thought she could make out dark shapes below, but she had no idea if they were rocks or something that wanted to eat her. She was starting to feel a cold dizzy sensation of overwhelming sleepiness. Her body was shivering. She wanted to give up, close her eyes and drift down into the nothingness and let it fill her. Stella was pointing again, and when Alex saw something enormous coming toward them out of the haze like a city bus with a yawning black maw, her first emotion wasn't fear or wonder: it was a kind of tired resignation. At least if she was eaten, she would stop shivering.

The massive new creature did not attack them. It didn't even divert its course to move away from them. It swam right under them, its huge spotted bulk passing less than a foot beneath. Alex could have reached down and touched it, but instead, she looked at her air gage. Nine minutes. Would it be enough? Stella was pointing again, pointing to something up on the surface. Alex realized it was the bottom of a small boat. There was a long rope hanging down beneath it with orange plastic disks at even intervals, and Stella was making for the rope with a renewed burst of speed. Alex followed, weary and relieved.

When they all reached the rope, Stella made the up sign again, followed by three flashes of her palm. Alex had never been so happy to see someone point upwards in her life. She filled her vest and headed up.

Nearly halfway to the surface, Stella grabbed her wrist and yanked her to a stop. Stella put Alex's hand on the rope and clenched her fist, then made a stop sign, palm out, like a cop directing traffic.

Why the hell were they stopping? Alex looked at her air gauge. Only eight minutes left. Stella hung there like Butch wasn't bleeding, like they had plenty of time to relax and enjoy the scenery. Was he infected? The other diver who was also bleeding did not seem upset or panicked by the inexplicable wait. He did not seem infected either. She could see now that it was Tig. He held the rope with one hand and his bleeding side with the other, eyes calm. Alex looked at her air again. Four minutes. Should she make the throat cutting, running out of air sign that Stella had showed them? What about Butch? He had less oxygen than she did and he was gripping her arm way too tightly, pale and terrified. She was about to poke Stella and show her Butch's nearly empty air gage when for no reason Alex could determine, Stella, Tig and Val started to ascend again. Stella waved for Alex and Butch to follow.

Alex broke the surface and spat out her regulator, sucking in a deep delicious breath of real, warm tropical air. She pushed the mask up onto her forehead. The sun felt so good on her chilly face. The sky was a gorgeous, flawless blue with tall white clouds stacked up on the distant horizon.

She could not believe that she was still alive.

Alex pushed Butch ahead of her and then climbed up the ladder onto the bobbing boat. The small, nondescript fishing boat was empty, seemingly abandoned with nothing but a small smear of blood on the railing toward the front. Alex looked back toward the smoking ring of military ships and saw chunks of bobbing flotsam crawling with infected soldiers and small floating clusters of people, maybe the ones that weren't weighted down with equipment. She wondered if they could doggy paddle their way to this boat. At least one of them had obviously been here before them.

Butch staggered into Alex and sat down hard on his ass, clutching his calf. Alex crouched beside him, peeled off her vest and empty tank and then helped him do the same. He was white, his teeth chattering, but he did not seem infected.

Stella appeared with silvery thermal blankets and wrapped them around Butch. She offered Butch a thin metal flask but he shook his head vehemently. Stella shrugged and took a swig herself.

"Can you suture?" Stella asked Alex as she squatted down and peeled up the leg of Butch's suit to examine the nasty ring of punctures.

Alex frowned and shook her head.

"Val?" Stella called over her shoulder.

"You bet," Val said.

Stella handed Val a first aid kit and rushed over to help Tig, who was able to stand and was pulling off his suit by himself, revealing a gory circle of teeth marks that ran from below his nipple to his hipbone. He too seemed utterly normal, hurt but not infected.

"Elevate his feet," Val told Alex, handing her a wadded up towel. "And try to get him out of this wet stuff."

Val cut into the neoprene suit, slashing the legs all the way up to his hips. Butch was able to wrestle his arms out and pull the wet Camp Isla Negra Tshirt off before collapsing back from exhaustion. Alex took the shirt and flung it off the edge of the boat like a contaminated thing.

"Shorts too," Val said. "This is no time for modesty. We need to get him warm and dry right away before I start sewing."

"Right," Alex said.

"No problem," Butch said through clenched teeth. "Keep in mind that I just got out of cold water, okay?"

Alex laughed and even Val smiled. Butch laughed a little too, but Alex could see how much pain he was in as she undid the shorts and pulled them carefully past his wound. She couldn't help but think of the last time she had pulled off his shorts and felt a thick blush creeping up her cheeks. She wrapped the thermal blankets tight around his body when Butch clutched her hand.

"Stay," he said. "Please."

Alex narrowed her eyes and then sat back down on the deck beside him, holding his hand in both of hers.

"Okay," Val said, opening a white sterile packet and pulling out a wicked-looking curved needle with a tail of black thread. "Here we go. Hold as still as you can."

"Fuck!" Butch said as Val poked the curved needle first into one meaty lip of the deepest puncture and then the other, pulling the two sides together in a tight knot. Alex had to look away, queasy and light headed. Instead she looked at Butch, who was looking back at her.

"Why am I okay?" he asked.

"Because you're a tough motherfucker," Alex replied.

"I mean, why am I..." Butch clenched his teeth and grunted as Val pull another knot tight. "Why am I not trying to eat your face right now?" He paused again. "Jesus fuck, that hurts."

"I don't know," Alex said. "Maybe the water was too cold or too salty for the virus to survive? I have no idea."

"When I felt that..." Again, a teeth-gritting pause. "That fucker latch on to me... I didn't think 'Oh shit, I'm gonna get eaten! I thought, Fuck I'm infected"

Alex nodded as he squeezed her hand painfully tight.

"I saw you there beside me." He grunted again and then looked up at her. "And I was afraid I was going to hurt you."

Alex had no idea what to say to that so she kept holding his hand.

"I wasn't afraid of dying," he continued. "I was afraid of hurting you.

"Ain't that sweet?" Val said. "Why don't you sit on his face or something and keep him still. Only ninety-seven more left to go."

Alex blushed again. She wanted to say something back, something to express the way she had felt when she saw him bitten, the way her heart felt bitten too, but she couldn't make the words come out.

TWENTY-FOUR

Butch sat on a padded bench on the left side of the deck, eating a weird energy bar. It was a sort of chalky dry cocoa flavor with crispy, unidentifiable bits mixed in, but he swore it was the most delicious meal he had ever had. He was in a lot of pain and felt a little feverish and more than a little exhausted, but he was alive and the warm breeze felt good on his skin.

He finished the energy bar and, unsure of what to do with the wrapper, went to stick it into the pocket of the loose-fitting khaki pants he had found stuffed below the bench and slipped on to avoid having to sit around wearing only the space blankets. He discovered that there was a slim leather wallet already in the hip pocket. Curious, he removed it and opened it up.

The Illinois driver's license read: "Lawrence T Fischer. Height: 6ft. Weight: 220lbs. Eyes: blue. Hair: blond."

He wore corrective lenses and was an organ donor. The photo was surly and unflattering, but Butch recognized the diver who had been introduced as Larry, the one who hadn't made it. The wallet also contained two credit cards, a discount card from a chain pet store, a punch card that allowed you to get a free car wash once all the spaces were punched out, and a rental card from a video store. There was some Costa Rican and American cash and a fortune from a Chinese cookie that read: "Take time to enjoy the simple things in life". Inside a plastic sleeve was a photograph. It showed the late Larry and a tall, red-haired lady in a low-cut top. They were both flushed and flashing big goofy smiles at the camera. They stood back to back with their sleeves pushed up and arms pressed together, showing off identical tattoos of old fashioned swallows. On the back of the photo, in slender, feminine hand were the words: "Bye bye, blackbird. Come home soon or I'll kill you! Love, Charlotte".

Suddenly, Butch didn't feel quite so good to be alive anymore.

Stella walked across the deck, compensating gracefully for the swaying floor by shifting her weight from one leg to the other while her hips and upper body stayed steady as a rock. She had dressed in

black fatigue pants and a white tank top, through which the dark nipples of her small, high breasts were clearly visible. Her feet were bare, toenails painted a deep, flawless burgundy. Her hair was shorter than his, barely more than dark stubble on her sleek and elegant head, and her sensuous mouth was turned up in a catty smirk. She held two sweating bottles of purified water in one hand and sat down beside him.

"How many of these have you had?" she asked, putting one of the bottles in his hand and cracking the other to take a swig.

"Two," Butch replied, opening the offered bottle. "But I feel like I need twenty more."

"You do," Stella said. "Breathing compressed air dehydrates the hell out of you." She took another sip. "Funny, isn't it? Getting dehydrated underwater. How's your leg?"

"It hurts," Butch replied. "But you should see the other guy."

"I did," Stella said. "I can't believe you knocked out a hammerhead shark. I should have learned my lesson back when I lost fifty bucks on your first fight against Troy Amerland. But from now on..." She put her hand on Butch's thigh. "I'm betting on you, Butcher."

"You knew me all this time?" Butch asked, looking down at her hand on his leg and frowning slightly.

"I thought you looked familiar," Stella said. "But when I saw you blast that shark, I knew it was you."

Butch shrugged, feeling more than a little awkward.

"There's a shower down below," Stella said, sliding her hand higher up his leg. "Hot water and everything. Want me to show you where it is?"

Predictably, it was at that moment when Alex appeared from below deck. She also held a bottle of water and her green eyes were blazing furiously with jealousy and poison.

"I thought you could use some more water," Alex said to Butch. "But I see you already have some."

Stella took her hand off Butch's leg and held her palms up in mock surrender.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Are you two—?"

"No," Alex said vehemently and turned to stalk away.

Stella raised an eyebrow at Butch. "I'll take that as a big 'yes'," she said. "See you later, Butcher."

"Just Butch," Butch said, but Stella was gone.

Butch sighed, finished up the last of the water and went to find Alex.

She was standing at the bow, leaning far out over the railing. The wind was whipping her dark hair around her face and her shoulders and arms were starting to look a little sunburned. She had found some fatigues like Stella's and they hung so low on her hipbones that only the firm bubble of her ass was preventing them from falling off. She was beautiful and fuming.

"Alex," he said softly.

"Forget it," she said, not turning around. "It doesn't matter."

"Come on, Alex," he said. "Don't be like this."

He reached out to touch her and she shook him off. He clenched his jaw and backed off, feeling a low surge of anger. Why did she run so hot and cold on him like this? And more importantly, why did it bother him so much?

Well, he knew the answer to that one, but he couldn't deal with that tangle of emotion, so he turned and limped back to the bench, calf throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Tig called from the helm. "This is your captain speaking. Buckle your seat belts as it looks like we're in for a bumpy ride."

Butch headed up to see what was going on. He found Stella already there with a pair of high-powered binoculars, looking off at the distant shore. Tig had his T-shirt off and wrapped around his head like a turban and a cigarette parked in one corner of his mouth. His entire back was covered with a huge Japanese-style tattoo of a snarling tiger. His side was thickly bandaged.

"Looks like we're late for the party," Tig said, gesturing with his chin toward the shore.

"Shit," Val said, appearing on the top of the ladder. "They're on the mainland too, huh?"

Butch could see fires dotting the beach and crowds of people writhing and struggling, flailing in the shallow water. There were

large crimson streaks on the white sand, and a jeep lay upside down, burning.

"Great," Butch said. "Now what?"

Stella took the binoculars from her eyes and scowled.

"Head south, down around the peninsula," she said. "Look for some place less populated to land and make our way back to..." She looked down at GPS locater on her wrist. "Manuel Antonio."

"That's gonna add at least a day to the trip," Tig said. "Probably more like two or three with conditions the way they are. More if we have to walk the whole way."

"You got a better idea?" Stella asked.

Tig said nothing, steering the boat due south.

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Every beach they hit seemed filled with more bloody madness. In some places, floating clots of infected people drifted dangerously close and more than one actually got a grip on the dive platform and tried to climb aboard until Stella or Val stepped in and cut off their heads. It wasn't until they had almost given up completely that they came across a tiny curl of beach hidden by rough rocks. The beach looked deserted and they were starting to get low on fresh water. It would have to do.

They anchored the boat and geared up. Stella gave them gloves, boots, goggles and respirators. She made sure that each person took a full canteen and a backpack. Butch glanced into his pack and saw several more energy bars, a sturdy flashlight, bug repellent and a bunch of other things he did not recognize in sealed plastic containers. Stella also doled out weapons.

She tossed Butch a shotgun and two heavy boxes of shells. "Ever fired one of these?"

Butch shook his head.

She handed a second shotgun to Alex.

"Val," Stella said. "Show them how to load."

"Right," Val replied, taking the heavy gun from Butch and checking it over with a casual, unthinking economy of movement that said she

had been doing this all her life. "If things are hot, which they probably will be, you're gonna want to use the combat load."

She slid the action open, exposing a rectangular hole in the side of the barrel. Almost too fast to see, she palmed one of the green shells, slid it under and around the barrel and into the hole, smartly snapping closed the action.

"Good to go," she said. "Now you do it. Keep the business end pointed toward the threat the whole time and make sure you put the cartridge in the right way. Remember—" She tapped the brass cap at one end of the shell. "The brass end is the ass end. Make sure the brass is pointed toward you in the chamber or you'll be really unhappy. Got it?"

"Right," Butch said, feeling less than confident in his ability to mimic her magician's sleight-of-hand smoothness with this deadly weapon.

Still, Butch performed the motion a few times until he felt a little less like an idiot. He then watched Alex as she fumbled to slide the shell into the hole, big hands awkward and shaking. The look of concentration and determination on her face as she tried again and again made Butch suddenly wonder if she was still mad at him.

Butch looked around as everyone prepared to pile into the slender inflatable dinghy that would take them to the shore. They looked pretty badass, almost like they knew what they were doing. Val had a high-powered rifle and two handguns. Tig and Stella had rifles too. Everyone had a machete. But Butch was already starting to sweat in the heavy protective gear and it would be worse once they got on the mainland. He wanted to believe that it would work, that they would make it somehow, against all odds, but he wished he felt more sure. He wished Alex would smile at him, in case he was about to get killed, or she was. The thought was more than he could take. He clenched his jaw and got into the dinghy.

The rocky beach was pristine and deserted except for some leggy birds and a single, cantankerous iguana who lifted his chin defiantly at them as they passed. There was a path leading up into the trees, but it was barely more than a pig trail, so narrow they had to walk

single file. As soon as the jungle closed around them, the suffocating heat wrapped itself around Butch's head like an alien face hugger.

"Do we have to wear these respirator things?" Alex asked.

"You don't want to get infected blood in your mouth or nose, do you?" Stella said.

"I need windshield wipers on my goggles," Butch said. "They're dripping with sweat."

"We haven't seen anyone infected," Alex said.

"Not yet," Stella said.

They found that the trail ended at the side of a fairly large paved road. Of course, it was paved only in that it was less than fifty percent potholes, but not by much. Stella took the lead and they all headed roughly north.

The numbing sameness of the winding road, the virulent green jungle around them and the lack of any sign of humans, infected or otherwise, started to wear on Butch. His bitten calf hurt, his feet hurt and he was hot and cranky. He almost found himself longing for an attack, to relieve the mind-deadening monotony. It wasn't easy to be understood through the respirators, but Butch didn't feel much like talking anyway. Never in a million years would he have imagined that he would find himself bored in the midst of a nightmare like this.

Eventually, after what felt like a century of hiking, they finally came upon a small roadside stand, barely more than a rusty tin roof held up by four crooked poles. There were a few crates of fruit stacked out front, more than one of which had been knocked over. Green coconuts and smashed mangoes were scattered all over the road. Several creatures like big, leggy, tailless rats were feasting on the broken fruit and chattering to each other, but they scattered as soon as they saw the human visitors. There were also some bins of what appeared to be used auto parts, stacks of dented mufflers and an ice chest full of beer and strange soft drinks that Butch had never heard of. There was a tin sign advertising Bavaria Beer, hanging, as if drunk, from a single chain while the broken chain on the other side swung back and forth with a sound like a unquiet spirit in a cheesy old cartoon.

The place was deserted except for a single corpse, possibly female, though it was difficult to be sure. She was headless and sprawled out on the side of the road. For an absurd moment, Butch thought she was dressed in a gaudy, sequined Miss America gown, but when he looked again, he realized that she was actually covered in shimmering green flies. She lay beside an ancient red Jeep, door hanging open as if she had tried to reach it and failed. Her head was nowhere to be seen.

Stella went to the Jeep and cranked the ignition. No dice.

"No gas," she said. "Is there a generator we can siphon?"

Tig was rooting through the little shack, filling his pack with cold beer and cigarettes. "Don't think so. The cooler's full of ice." He pulled down his respirator and cracked a bottle of Bavaria, draining it in three gulps. "Better drink up while it's cold."

Tig held a beer out to Stella.

She shrugged and took it. "Might as well. Since no one is trying to eat us at the moment."

"Butch?" Tig asked, holding out a beer.

"No thanks, man," Butch said. "I guess I'll take one of those sodas."

"Tamarindo or Jamaica?" Tig asked, studying the painted labels of a pair of old-fashioned bottles.

"I have no idea," Butch said. "Give me the red one."

"I'll take one of them beers," Val said.

Tig handed her a Bavaria.

"Alex?" Tig asked.

"I'll have that other soda," she replied.

"A tamarindo girl, are you?" Tig asked. "Comin' right up."

They all stood around drinking in introspective silence, still keeping a paranoid eye on the jungle all around them. Butch pulled off his respirator to take a sip of the lurid red soda and was immediately sorry. The rotten stench of dead flesh wormed its way deep into his nostrils, tainting the flavor of the drink and making him a little queasy. He gulped the soda down as quickly as possible and put the respirator back on, but it was as if the smell had coated the inside of his sinuses, filling his head with that brutal, toothy reek.

He did not want to throw the empty bottle on the ground, so he went looking for a trash barrel. There wasn't anything that looked even remotely close, so he set the bottle in one of the fruit crates, figuring it was better than nothing. When he looked up, he noticed a huge toucan perched on a low branch to his right not ten feet away. The bird was giving him the hairy eyeball and clacked its beak furiously at him. Something like that didn't even seem real, like a creature made up by the Nature Channel. How could it even fly with that huge preposterous beak? Anyway, it gave him something else to look at besides the dead woman in her shimmering fly gown.

"Okay," Stella said, squatting and extracting a radio from her backpack. "Since we have a minute, let's see if we can pick up any military broadcasts. Then I want to keep heading north along this road and see if we can score some kind of vehicle. We need to find a safe place to make camp pretty soon. We only have a few more hours of light."

She turned on the radio and started fooling with the dials. Butch heard nothing but static until a slow, slightly befuddled American voice manifested out of the white noise.

"If anybody is out there," the voice said. "This is Smoke and it would be great if you could, like, answer..."

Stella looked up at Tig. "What do you think?"

"Whoever it is, they might have a vehicle," Tig replied. "Gasoline."

"Or they might be looking to steal guns or equipment," Val said. "Capture and rape women."

"Jeez," Alex said. "You really believe the worst of everybody, don't you?"

"I haven't been proven wrong yet," Val replied.

"Yeah!" Alex said. "Well, what about us?"

"Quiet," Stella said. Then, into the radio: "We copy you, Smoke. What is your current position? Over."

"Oh, wow!" the voice on the radio replied. "Wow! Okay, yeah. I'm like, about fifteen kilometers outside of Puerto Jimenez, man. Right on the edge of Corcovado."

Stella consulted her GPS and nodded. "We're less than five klicks south from Corcovado," she said. "What's the best way to reach you?

Over."

"Wow," the voice said again, and Val rolled her eyes dramatically. "I guess you'd wanna take the coast road there; since it's pretty much the only road, and um, go a little ways till you see this big rock that kinda looks like a Volkswagen beetle. There's an unmarked road there that you can take for a while and then—"

"Okay," Stella cut in. "Look, have you got any flares?"

"Um..." The voice trailed off.

"I don't know about this," Tig said. "The guy sounds like a real space case."

Stella shrugged and then the voice came back on.

"Yeah, I got one left," the voice said. "I don't know, it's kinda old, but maybe it still works. I'm gonna shoot it now, okay?"

A bright ball of fire arced up into the air a few miles to the northwest.

"We see you, Smoke," Stella said. "We're on the way. Over."

"Okay, man," the voice said. "That's great. But hey, be careful, cause there's all these really uncool wigged out people around. Everybody is real sick and freaking out on some kind of bad trip or something. I'm, like, the only one left. But it's safe in here, if you wanna come by and kick it for a little while."

"Copy that, Smoke," Stella said. "Over and out."

She turned off the radio.

"Great," Val said. "Sounds like a total waste of time."

"We need a vehicle and more supplies," Stella said. "Guy sounds like an easy mark. We can hole up there for the night and make up for lost time in the morning. Come on. Gear up, kids."

Butch nodded and followed, trying to hold the shotgun like he meant business.

It was a long, arduous walk along a twisting secondary road that switched back on itself again and again. It rained buckets for almost exactly two minutes, long enough to drench them to the skin, and then stopped as if shut off like a faucet. Butch was drowning in sweat and trying to ignore that dull pain chewing at his calf with every step. His wet clothes felt heavy.

They passed several little dwellings, barely more solid than the roadside stand, and deserted except for occasional dogs, chickens or curious monkeys. Torn laundry, streaked with blood and dirt, flapped on clotheslines. A bicycle lay on its side in the center of the road; a black and white striped bird with a startled expression and a punk rock haircut sat on one of the upturned wheels.

No humans anywhere.

It was eerie how quickly the jungle was creeping in to reclaim the cleared spaces, now that the humans who cleared them were gone. In a few weeks, it would be as if they were never there.

As they got closer and closer to the source of the flare, they began to hear disturbing sounds: hissing, scraping and frantic scrabbling.

"I guess everyone else had the same idea as we did," Stella said. "This must be the place to be. Look alive, people. Here we go."

Butch thought he would get used to this eventually, or at least numb to the horror and sickening dread that washed over him when confronted with the infected, but it hit him totally fresh and vivid every time. When they rounded the bend and came upon a walled compound, there were crazed infected people throwing themselves with psychotic determination against the brightly painted walls, leaving behind thick smears of blood and vomit that blended badly with the psychedelic swirls of kindergarten colors.

There was a large garden area to the left and several fruit trees to the right. The compound looked to be L-shaped, but the wall was too high to tell what was inside. Large solar panels topped the far side of the wall. There was a sort of driveway, barely more than a pair of deep wheel ruts, leading up to a large, wrought iron gate with a moon on one side and a sun on the other. The gate was backed with sheet metal so it was not possible to reach through the bars.

"Looks like he's got a vehicle of some kind in there," Stella said, gesturing to the wide wheel tracks.

"Looks pretty big, whatever it is," Tig replied.

A sudden high-pitched shriek made Butch jump and raise the barrel of his shotgun toward the source of the sound. Something flew past his head, but he could not see anyone in the trees and did not want to start randomly shooting and attract attention from the

infected people around the wall. There was a sudden wet smack to his left and he turned to see what had happened.

"Goddammit," Val cursed, wiping brown slime from her goggles. "Fucking monkeys."

Alex sniggered as Val struggled to clear the monkey shit from her goggles, but the infected people were already turning eager faces toward the sound of Val's curse. They were rapidly abandoning their mad finger painting and heading straight for Val.

"Val, Tig," Stella said. "Go for knees. Butch and Alex: blow their fucking heads off."

"You got it," Tig said, taking out the knee of a swiftly moving man in a Hawaiian shirt. "Tigga on the trigga, baby."

Val narrowed her eyes and tightened her lips, annoyed as she kneecapped a second man, this one shirtless and wearing tight, black, knee-length shorts. He did not go down until she took out his other knee.

The guy in the Hawaiian shirt was crawling, reaching for Butch's boot. Butch put the barrel of the shotgun against the top of his head and pulled the trigger. The noise was loud and the kick of the big weapon felt like a punch in the shoulder. The guy's head blew apart like a ripe watermelon and he twitched for a few seconds, then went still.

Stella got on the radio. "Smoke, do you copy?" she said between the gunshots. "We're here, outside your compound. Open the gate. Over."

"I can hear you," Smoke replied. "Get closer in, okay? I'll drop down a ladder so you can climb up."

"Copy that," Stella replied. "Over and out."

The people swarming toward them were an odd assortment of local police, Ticos, some surfer types and two or three older tourists in cute matching Patagonia outfits, now hopelessly torn and soiled.

They fought their way through the infected crowd. Butch found himself using the barrel of the shotgun as a club more often than he fired the thing, but he was proud of himself for pulling off that combat load that Val had shown them. He had grabbed another shell

from his pocket and was about to try again when he heard Val call out.

"Hey, watch out!"

Butch stepped back as a woman reached for him. Startled, his foot punched through the leaves and branches beneath a loose scattering of dirt. Off balance, arms waving wildly, he dropped the shotgun and toppled backward, into a deep hole.

The wind was knocked out of him. Butch was not alone. In the dim light at the bottom of the pit, he could make out a scrawny Tico in a filthy blue T-shirt and worn black dress slacks, squatting in the far corner. The man's long hair was wild and clotted with blood and his eyes were swollen to the size of gory tennis balls in his skeletal face. It took a second for the Tico to register Butch's presence, and when he did, he threw himself across the deep, grave-shaped pit, hissing and snarling.

Butch dodged to the right, yanked the guy's Tshirt up over his head and pinned him against the wall with his boot in the center of his back. Butch wedged himself against the opposite side of the pit, keeping the guy trapped against the wall, facing away and scrabbling madly at the dirt.

"Could use a little help down here," he called.

He heard another volley of shots and then Tig's voice.

"Leave him," he said. "It's too dangerous."

"Fuck that," Alex said.

To Butch's surprise, Tig came suddenly crashing down into the pit, almost as if Alex had pushed him in. He nearly fell on top of Butch, knocking both Butch and the infected Tico aside.

"Gee, thanks," Butch said to Tig, helping him to his feet.

"Don't mention it," Tig said, dodging to one side as the still-blinded Tico lunged toward him. Butch grabbed the Tico from behind and knocked him down onto the ground. He grabbed the man's kicking feet up under his armpits and tied him up in a Boston Crab. Tig unsheathed his machete and chopped the Tico's head off.

"Look," Tig said, suddenly sheepish as he wiped the machete blade on the headless man's pant leg. "Sorry about... you know."

"No problem," Butch said, lacing his fingers together to give Tig a leg up. "Shall we?"

"Right," Tig said, and stepped on the bridge of Butch's hands.

He lifted Tig up and out, then he saw Alex's goggled face appear at the rim of the pit.

"Come on!" she called, holding down her hand for him to grab.

He took her hand and was again amazed at her raw strength as she pulled him up and out of the pit.

"Thanks," Butch said. "I owe you another one."

"I've lost track," Alex said. "Let's not get killed okay?"

"Right," Butch said.

Another wave of the infected charged around the side of the compound. This assault of the dead consisted mostly of women, all disturbingly young and formerly pretty. When one dived at Butch, he turned and swiftly hip-tossed her down into the open pit. A second was on him almost at once, but Alex was right there, shoved the barrel of her shotgun into the open, hissing mouth and pulled the trigger. The hot rain of gore that covered them both made Butch glad he was wearing protective clothing, no matter how sweaty and uncomfortable it was. It was like showering in brains.

The four of them were battling their way toward the gate. Tig continued to kneecap the oncoming infected while Val used her machete to methodically chop off head after head.

"Hey!" Stella called. Butch looked up to see a blond, wildly dreadlocked head poking up over the wall slightly to the left of the gate.

"Watch out for those traps," the blond called, pointing to the open pit.

"Great. Thanks," Butch replied, turning to kick back a maniacal fat woman in a bloody sundress. "Could you drop that ladder now?"

"Oh, yeah. Right." The blond head disappeared and reappeared seconds later to drop down a rope ladder with painted wooden rungs like something a kid would make to get up to his tree house. "Don't let any of those freaky people crawl up after you though, okay?"

"Okay." Stella pushed Alex toward the ladder. "Go!"

Alex started climbing swiftly, and as soon as she was half way up, Stella shoved Butch toward the ladder. He started climbing, his bitten calf aching every time he used that leg to take a step higher

"Hey man," the blond guy said—Smoke, presumably—when Butch reached the top. "Welcome."

"How's it going?" Butch asked.

Alex was there beside him on the top of the wall and without even realizing he was doing it, he reached out and took her hand. She did not hit him or pull away, and he felt suddenly almost too exhausted to stand.

Val was next, followed by Tig and Stella. Stella was climbing backward, fighting back an infected farmer in a ratty straw hat. He was clutching at her with long, sinewy arms as she struggled to kick and climb at the same time.

"Come on," Alex said, gripping one side of the ladder. "Pull!"

Butch grabbed the other side of the ladder and they hauled Stella up. When the infected farmer clutched at the top edge of the wall, scrambling to pull himself up after Stella, she turned and neatly lopped his hand off. The farmer fell to the ground, hat flying backward off his head. His severed hand bounced comically off his forehead and landed in his upside down hat.

"Two points!" Tig said, high-fiving Stella.

"Let's go on down now," Smoke said, pointing to a fixed wooden ladder on the inside of the compound wall. "Everything's cool."

Butch seriously doubted that everything was cool, but he made his way down the ladder anyway. When he reached the bottom and removed his respirator, he was immediately assailed with a heavy miasma of incense, patchouli, armpit funk and animal dung. There were colorful little chickens strutting around the dirt yard and a single, floppy-eared goat regarded Butch curiously out of strange, horizontal pupils. Within the compound's walls were three buildings, one large and two smaller. The larger building had an awful painting on the front that looked like a bad mural sketched by third graders.

The building on the left looked like a garage of sorts, because the wheel tracks led up to a big tarp-covered lump inside. Probably a Volkswagen bus or some other kind of hippy-mobile, Butch figured.

He didn't exactly know what the other building was, but there was an open-air kitchen in front and Butch could hear a low rhythmic thumping coming from the inside. It took Butch a second to realize that the shiny red door of the building was set right between the chubby spread legs of a painting: a giant fat woman with the sun for a head. Lovely.

The dreadlocked guy was spreading his arms wide and trying to get everyone's attention. Butch noticed that the guy was wearing a sort of a skirt, like a sheer tie-dyed sarong and nothing else. He had a million different beads, bells, feathers and things woven in his blond dreadlocks, making him look like a human cat toy. He was tall and thin with big wooden plugs in his stretched out earlobes and way too many necklaces.

"Okay, everybody," he said. "If it would be okay I'd like you all to listen to me for one minute."

"Go ahead, kid," Stella said.

"Okay, cool," he replied. "First of all it would be a good idea if everybody took their bloody infected clothing and shoes and stuff off over here. I'll get things for you guys to wear while we boil your infected stuff, unless you feel like going sky clad, which would be totally cool, too, because shyness about our bodies is, like, a totally artificial construct of modern society."

The dreadlocked guy disappeared around the back of the central building and Alex looked at Butch with a frown.

"Sky clad?" she asked.

"He means naked," Tig said, stripping off his boots and outer shirt. "But, you know, I wouldn't want to scare the white girls."

He winked at Val, who glowered and turned away.

"Leave your gloves on till last," Stella said, unselfconsciously dropping her pants and revealing the sheer purple thong beneath. Butch looked away quickly before Alex got upset again.

Eventually they had all stripped down to nothing and stood away from the pile of contaminated clothing and gear, trying not to look at each other and feeling extremely foolish.

The dreadlocked guy returned with an arm full of what appeared to be different pieces of batiked fabric. He handed out the pieces and

Butch examined what he had been given. It was a large purple rectangle of cloth, with fringe on both ends and a design that might have been either turtles or striped footballs.

"What the hell are we supposed to do with these?" Alex asked, holding up a pink and yellow tie-dyed scrap.

"Just wrap it around your bodies like this," the guy said, demonstrating with his own sarong.

"Like this?" Butch asked, skeptical, wrapping the cloth around his waist like a towel.

"Yeah, that's it," the dreadlocked guy said, nodding approvingly. "Really great. Perfect."

Butch felt ridiculous, but he was too damn tired to care. Alex came over to him and tightened the knot around his waist, smiling a little.

"You look like you are ready for some kind of luau or something," she said. "All you need is a necklace of leaves and flowers."

She looked pretty funny in her outfit too. She had tied the cloth around her body above her breasts and it was barely long enough to cover the lower curve of her ass.

"I feel beat to shit," Butch said. "I need to lay down for a minute."

Alex nodded and took his arm. There were some musty cushions scattered around in the shade beneath a small tree. Butch let Alex lead him over and sit him down. He sprawled out with his head pillowed on her firm, muscular thigh and she touched the back of his head with a tentative hand. He watched Smoke helping Tig with his appropriately tiger striped sarong for a little while.

But before he knew it, Butch was fast asleep.

TWENTY-FIVE

Alex's leg was starting to feel drowsy so she gently extracted herself, left Butch snoozing beneath the tree and went to find the others to see what was happening. There were several huge vats, filled with their bloody clothing presumably, boiling on the kerosene burners in the outdoor kitchen. Stella and the others were gathered around the garage-like building, tarp pulled aside to reveal a huge, curiously modified vehicle that might have once been a van of some description.

It resembled a bizarre post-apocalyptic minitank, as if hippies had carjacked the Landmaster from *Damnation Alley* to go to Woodstock. Or it had been inspired by the Dead Reckoning in George A Romero's *Land of the Dead*. It was half painted with the same bad, childish swirls as the outside walls.

"I was kinda thinking that me and my wives could, like, drive down to Panama," Smoke was saying. "We could find that canal and get a boat or something."

"How long did it take you to come up with that plan?" Stella asked, kicking the vehicle's fat, dusty tires.

"Well..." he frowned and trailed off.

"I'm sorry," Tig said. "Did you say wives? As in more than one?"

"It's not like I really have two wives," Smoke said, making his point by shaping the air with long slender hands. "I am, like, an equal partner in a loving, polyamorous relationship."

"Homeboy's got some *Three's Company* action going on!" Tig said. "So where are Janet and Chrissy anyway?"

"It's not like that," Smoke said, scowling.

"Yeah," Stella said. "Where are they? I thought you said you were alone here."

"Okay, listen up everybody," Smoke said. "Don't freak out or nothing."

He took them around to the red door into the side of the kitchen building, below the painting of the big, fat naked lady.

"This is the women's house," he said. "It's supposed to be a sacred female-only space, but these are special circumstances so..."

He opened the door between the painted fat lady's thighs and Alex covered her mouth and nose as a powerful stink washed over her. Inside were two women. One was thick and chubby with blonde dreadlocks like Smoke's. The other was tall and skinny with short dark pixie haircut. They were both naked and bound with gags made from rubber tires jammed between their teeth. They were also infected and the hot stench of rotting blood coming from their bodies hit Alex like a sledgehammer, making her gag.

"This is Earth and Layla," he said. "My wives."

"Jesus," Stella said. "Why are you keeping them in here? Why don't you cut off their heads and put them out of their misery?"

"I couldn't do that," Smoke said. "I love them."

"I can," said Val, unsheathing her machete.

"No, no, no!" Smoke cried. "Listen, here's the deal. If you want to take my vehicle, we have to bring them too. Maybe your scientist friend can, like, cure them or something."

"No way," Stella said. "No fucking way. We'll walk."

"Hey, wait! Listen!" Smoke said. "I can see how you might think it's a bad idea and all, but they can't hurt you. We can bundle them up in plastic tarps and they won't bother anybody. You're way more likely to get hurt walking."

"He's got a point," Tig said. "Without wheels we're pretty much fucked."

"I mean," Smoke said, looking down and away. "You guys have all those guns so you could, like, take my vehicle if you wanted to go that way, but I'd really rather you didn't. I'll help you, I made dinner for everybody and stuff. I really don't want to be left behind."

Stella sighed and shook her head reluctantly. "Okay, look. We can pack them in the back, but I want someone watching them at all times. First sign of trouble..." She made a throat slashing motion across her neck like the running out of air sign. Alex was starting to feel like she really was running out of air. Nothing made sense anymore.

"I'm sorry," Alex said. "Scientist friend? What's he talking about?"

Stella looked at Alex and then at Smoke. "Come on."

They left the "women's house" and the bound and writhing wives and stepped back out into the more gentle stink of animals and incense.

"Here's the deal," Stella said. "We'll take you and your wives to Dr Cain, but if they or you become a burden, even for a minute, we leave you behind. Got it?"

"Who the hell is Dr Cain?" Alex asked.

"Dr Cain is the one who is gonna fix everything," Stella said. "She can remove your camera rigs and she's working on an antivirus right now to put a stop to this fucking nightmare. The plan is to get back to her lab in Dart's compound up near Chirripo. From there, she says she has a new and better way to recapture Jason. He's the carrier, the key to this whole mess."

The idea that there was some kind of authority at the other end of this crazy quest made Alex feel simultaneously relieved and anxious. The last time there were authority figures ready to fix everything, it hadn't gone so well. She seriously hoped that this mythical Dr Cain had better luck than the soldiers on the island.

Smoke had apparently spent the time that they were making their way toward the compound cooking a big pot of something vegetarian and spicy. It actually wasn't bad at all, but perhaps was biased because it was the first hot meal she'd had in what felt like a million years. She wolfed down two large helpings and then refilled her bowl. She went to see if Butch was hungry. It was dark and she needed to use the flashlight from her pack to find her way back to the little tree.

"Hey," she said softly, squatting down beside Butch. "I thought you might be hungry."

Butch sat up, wild-eyed and startled. He put a hand to his temple and groaned. "Thanks," he replied, taking the bowl and spoon. "But let's go inside, okay? I'm the one getting eaten out here.'

They went into the main house. It was all one big room with no furniture except for a few low tables and a bunch more cushions. Smoke was already asleep in a hammock strung up in the far corner. Stella and Tig had curled up together in a nest of cushions and Val

was sitting at one of the low tables, field stripping her rifle by the light of a Coleman lantern.

Alex led Butch to another table and they sat together in silence while Butch ate. Alex used her flashlight to dig through her backpack until she found some bug bite cream and rubbed the stuff into the welts where hungry mosquitoes had feasted on his back, arms and legs.

"Get some rest, you two," Val said, putting the reassembled rifle on the table and turning down the lantern. "This may be your last chance for safe sleep."

Alex gathered up some cushions and a patchwork quilt that smelled like wood smoke and sandalwood and lay Butch down, covering him like a child.

"Alex," he said, hand on her arm. "Stay with me."

She looked down at him and nodded. She switched off the flashlight and the darkness closed in around them. It was so black that she had to feel her way over to him. She slid beneath the thin quilt and he put his arms around her, pulling her close and resting his head against her breasts. His body felt hot and feverish against hers.

"Things are so strange, Alex," he whispered. "I don't know anything anymore."

"Shush," she replied. "It doesn't matter."

Alex knew this was a bad idea, that she was losing her battle to stay distant and independent, but after everything they'd been through, nothing else seemed real besides the feel of his breath on her skin and his arms around her. She touched his rough, stubbly cheek and turned his face up to kiss her. She did not stop him. She couldn't. Instead, she kissed him back with a slow, powerful passion building inside her. They were in a room full of other people, covered only by a thin blanket, but it was like nothing else existed, like they were the only ones left on the planet. The flimsy scraps of fabric wrapped around their bodies easily fell away, and this time it was achingly slow and fierce, barely moving and drinking each other's breath.

After, she held him close as he whispered to her, told her everything, about his mother, about his grandmother and Ace and

the women in the hotel. She knew in her heart that he was innocent. He was a good man; the first good man she had ever known and she realized she would do anything to help him. That she loved him, whether she liked it or not.

"Promise you won't leave me," Butch said, voice drowsy and already half asleep. "I couldn't stand it if you left me."

"I promise," Alex said, though he was already asleep.

***

As soon as the dawn sky began to slide gently from purple to pink, Stella was up and on everyone to get moving. Butch woke up with Alex's back pressed against his belly and her firm, muscular ass moving sleepily against him. It was extremely difficult to make himself pull away and get up. As he went off to the outhouse for a piss, he started to remember more about the night before. He was appalled at how intense his feelings for Alex had become. He never meant to open up to her like that, to expose all his soft spots, his weaknesses, everything. He hadn't shared so much of himself with anyone in his life, not even Ace, who had been closer than family.

He felt awkward, uneasy, and he had no one to blame but himself. When he came back into the main house, Alex wasn't there. She must have been off getting cleaned up. Butch was almost glad that he did not have to face her yet.

Smoke was already awake and had brewed a huge pot of fantastic, rich and pungent coffee. It was the best Butch had ever tasted and made their lunatic plan to find this mythical Dr Cain seem almost feasible.

"Got any milk?" Tig asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and holding a large, unglazed cup covered in astrological signs.

"Ask Astara," Smoke said.

"Who?" Tig frowned.

Smoke smiled and gestured to the black and white nanny goat.

"Are you kidding?" Tig shook his head. "I'll take it black, thanks."

"What do you say, Astara?" Val said, holding out a handful of granola.

The goat ate contentedly out of Val's hand. When Astara had eaten all of the granola, Val reached down and grabbed a hold of one of the goat's long, sagging teats and squeezed a foamy jet of milk into her own cup.

"Hippy cappuccino!" she said, taking a swig.

Butch shuddered. He liked his coffee black so he didn't care but it still seemed somehow, well, less than hygienic.

Whatever else you might have said about Smoke, he was a good host and an excellent cook. He fussed around everyone like a mother hen. He even baked fresh muffins in the wood-burning oven, though they were a little odd, with a kind of vegan hippy flavor to them. Still they beat the energy bars all to hell . Never mind the fucking ant eggs. Butch watched Smoke going around refilling everyone's coffee and making sure everyone got enough to eat. It was obviously really hard for him to be alone.

Butch scrubbed down with refreshing peppermint soap and dressed in his still damp but clean clothes. He saw Alex, standing over by the gate with a cup of coffee. She had washed her hair and bound it back in a gleaming braid. She wore the fatigues and a tank top but had not yet put on the long sleeved shirt. Her muscular arms and shoulders glistened with sunscreen and bug repellent. She turned back and gave him a shy little smile that seemed odd coming from such a powerful woman.

Stella had the curious vehicle all packed up and ready when Smoke called Butch and Tig over to the kitchen.

"Okay," Smoke said. "Let's get Earth and Layla wrapped up in these tarps." He scooped up a handful of olive drab plastic sheeting. "And get them in the back of the bus."

Smoke had changed into something approaching normal men's clothing, though everything was in wild, mismatched colors, almost like a child imitating their protective gear out of grandma's dress-up trunk. Green and purple striped pants, a cotton long sleeved shirt with embroidered detailing on the collar and cuffs, clunky red Doc Martin boots and what looked like women's gardening gloves with a pattern of jaunty vegetables. Amazingly he had his own, expensive and heavy-duty respirator and goggles.

Alex had told Butch about the infected wives, but it didn't prepare him for the sight of them, bound and gagged, and slick with blood like the stars of some heinous snuff film. He felt much better once they were covered with the plastic. At that point, they could have been sacks of animated laundry. Butch hefted his assigned bundle and carried it to the open back doors of the vehicle.

"Ready?" Stella asked as Smoke climbed in behind the wheel.

"Ready," Smoke said. "Butch, unlock the chain."

Smoke tossed Butch a key on a beaded necklace. Tig, Val and Alex climbed into the vehicle while Butch unlocked the chain. He could feel infected people yanking on the gate from the outside, and as soon and the chain was off, they wrenched it part way open and started reaching through.

"Shit!" Butch said, dodging back and out of reach.

"Come on," Alex said.

Butch dived into the open side door of the vehicle and Alex slammed it shut behind him. Seconds later, a skinny infected woman threw herself at the side of the vehicle, hissing and clawing.

Smoke floored it and hit the partially open gates. The gates flew wide, one side knocked loose from its hinges and they barreled down the rough driveway. Inside the vehicle, they all bounced around like Ping-Pong balls in a tin can. Smoke let out a crazed squeal of delight and punched a cassette player in the dash. Butch was expecting the Grateful Dead or Phish, but what came blasting through the crackly old speakers was Nine Inch Nails "Head Like A Hole". The grinding, industrial beat was weirdly appropriate as the berserk infected threw themselves at the vehicle and were mowed down. Behind the wheel, Smoke had apparently left his apologetic vegan peacenik ways behind and actually seemed to take a manic joy in swerving to take the bastards out. As Smoke sped down the driveway, the infected ran behind the vehicle like stray dogs and then, one by one, they each gave up and dropped back.

"We lost them," Val reported from her seat in the back.

"Outstanding," Stella said. "Good job, Smoke."

Smoke laughed and gave her the thumbs up.

"We should be able to reach Dr Cain's lab before sundown," Tig said. "Provided we don't—"

He didn't have time to finish the sentence as the bulky vehicle skidded on a turn and slammed down hard into a ditch. The wheels spun uselessly, spraying mud into the air.

"Oh, wow," Smoke said. "I always bottom out in this ditch."

"Fuck," Stella said. "What do we do now? Get out and push?"

"Well," Smoke said. "I usually walk over to Ferd's place and see if he'll drive out with a winch and give me a hand."

"Okay," Stella said. "How far is his place?"

"Oh, about two or three hours," Smoke replied.

"Which way?"

Smoke pointed back the way they came.

"Great," Stella rolled her eyes. "How do you know he'll be there?"

"Well, I guess he won't," Smoke said. "Since you cut his hand off yesterday. But we could try to, like, hot-wire his truck. You guys know how to do all that secret spy stuff right? It'll only fit three people in the cab though and I guess nobody wants to ride in the bed, so like, some of us should wait here with Earth and Layla while the other ones go get the truck."

He beamed like he was immensely proud of his brilliant plan. The whole time while Smoke was reeling off strategic genius, Val was clenching and unclenching her fists and looking as if she was getting ready to shoot him. The atmosphere inside the stuffy vehicle was unbearably tense. Alex pointed out the back window.

"Look," she said. "Horses."

There was a small corral on the other side of the road, about fifty yards down. Inside were three horses, two brown and one white. One of the brown ones was dragging a headless corpse, tangled in one of the stirrups. It looked like there were one or two more corpses around the edges of the corral but no infected people that Butch could see.

"Three horses," Stella said. "If we double up we can do it. Anyone know how to ride?"

Before Val could pipe up, Stella cut her off. "Yeah, I know, Val. Of course you do. Anyone else?"

"I can," Alex said. "I'm no expert or nothing but I used to ride when I was a kid."

"Well, okay then," Stella said. "Let's divvy up the supplies. I want Butch with Alex. Tig, you're with me, and Val, you get Mr Fucking *Mad Max* here."

"No way. Uh-huh," Smoke said. "I can't leave Earth and Layla."

"Then you're on your own. Val?" Stella started filling up and checking the packs, tossing one to Butch. "Ready?"

Butch took the pack she handed him and looked over at Alex, who was staring out through the mud-splattered window.

"Go!" Stella said.

She kicked open the back doors of the vehicle and they sprinted across the road.

Val hit the fence first and climbed up and over. Alex followed and Butch was right behind her. He was amazed to see that the wooden fence posts were actually growing, new green leaves sprouting up from the cut top of each one. It never ceased to amaze him how alive everything was out here. Life itself was like something you could actually feel, like sunshine or the flow of water.

And in some awful way, that Jason guy was almost like the opposite of that green and vigorous life force, like death personified, but utterly unnatural in its manifestation. Somehow, in this virulently living environment, Jason's death force had spilled out and infected everything around him.

Just like these dead fence posts were striving to become full-grown trees again, the victims cut down by Jason were infected by his evil, and struggling to come back. It didn't seem possible, but there was no denying the reality of what was happening. Maybe the scientist they were looking for would have some kind of rational explanation.

"Guys!" Smoke called. "Hey guys, wait up."

"Butch turned back to see Smoke running toward them, waving his arms. From the far side of the truck there was a blur of movement and then suddenly a fat, horribly sunburned man in tight little shorts and nothing else came barreling toward Smoke. He was obviously infected, sporting the now familiar bulging, bleeding eyes and large showy wounds that would have been fatal for a normal person. A

huge fatty slash ran from his collarbone, through his large, almost womanish chest and down into his belly. He was also missing an ear and a large flap of skin from his cheek, revealing two rows of brownish, tobacco stained teeth.

"Look out!" Stella called, but Tig already had a bead on the advancing man and blew out first one leg, then the other. He fell and Smoke jumped from his reaching grasp. Smoke flew across the road like his ass was on fire.

"Shit," he said when he reached and vaulted the fence. "Shit. This really sucks, man."

Butch could see that he was terrified and torn up about leaving the women. He was probably a liability, but Butch couldn't think of a fellow human that way.

"When we get the cure," Smoke was saying as they crept slowly toward the horses, "I'll come back. I'll come back for them."

"Sure you will," Butch said.

"I can't help them by getting killed, right?"

"Right," Butch said.

Smoke threw a glance back at the goofy useless vehicle. The back doors were open and Butch could see the two women squirming in their tarps like some kind of giant larva. He shuddered and put a hand on Smoke's skinny shoulder.

"It's okay, man," Butch said.

Smoke nodded like a little kid trying to be brave.

"Go with Val, okay?" Butch said.

"Yeah," Smoke said. "Okay."

There were three more corpses, all still and dead. One looked as if he had been trampled by the horses, neck broken and ribs sticking up through the fabric of his formerly white shirt. The other two were missing heads.

All three horses were anxious about the dead bodies and skittish from the gunshots. The white mare didn't have a saddle, only a bridle. Val was walking slowly up to her, making soft soothing sounds and holding her hand out. The white mare turned her head, regarding Val with one wide, suspicious eye.

"Shit," Stella said. "Here comes another one."

This new infected person looked as if it had been run over by a truck. It was so badly crushed and broken that it was impossible to tell its gender. It was crawling through the long grass toward them, spitting and wheezing. Alex raised the barrel of her shotgun.

"No, wait!" Val said, but the bloodied, pathetic thing was reaching for Alex's leg. Alex pulled the trigger.

The horse bolted.

Val swore and leapt up onto one of the more placid brown horses, taking off after the fleeing white mare. The white mare could not actually get away, since the corral fence was too high to jump, but she ran around and around in wild panicked circles. Val rode the brown horse up beside the terrified white mare and, to everyone's amazement, she leapt from the saddle, landing firmly on the white mare's unsaddled back.

The mare bucked and twisted, but Val held firm until it settled to a slow trot. Holding the reins of both horses, Val rode over to where the rest of them stood.

"Saddle up, cowpokes," Val said.

Alex took the reins of the brown horse Val had ridden and climbed into the saddle. Stella took the other brown one, cutting free the tangled corpse and mounting up, helping Tig up behind her. Val extended her hand to Smoke and he awkwardly scrambled up behind her.

Alex held her hand down to Butch. "Come on."

The ride was uneventful, beautiful even as they wound higher and higher into the mountains. They easily outran the handful of infected people they came across and seemed to be making excellent progress until they came to a large, multi-car pile-up blocking the road on a blind curve. At least one car had smashed through the guardrail and tumbled down the sheer edge of the mountain smashing to bits on the rocks below.

On the narrow road before them was a large upturned truck, a smaller pick-up laying on its side with a bloated corpse hanging half out the shattered windshield and one of those little rented tourist jeeps, its front end smashed and hood crumpled up so that Butch could not see the occupants. Even through his respirator he could

smell the stench of death. So could the horses and they were clearly not happy about it, especially the white one. They danced backward away from the crash and whinnied anxiously. There was no clearance at all on the right, as the big truck was flush up against the high rock wall. On the left was the drop. There was maybe a foot and a half of space between the pickup truck and the edge.

"Okay, kids." Stella said. "We dismount and lead the horses. Slow and careful, ok?"

Butch had never really given much thought to fear of heights. He remembered visiting the Stratosphere in Vegas and feeling a kind of nervous excitement looking out over the edge of the observation deck, but he had been there with a Burlesque dancer named Cha Cha and his mind was on other things.

Looking over the crumbling edge and dizzying drop, he felt a creeping kind of terror coiling in his belly. "Can't we climb over the trucks?" he asked, hating how wimpy that sounded,

"Well," Stella said "Some of us can, sure, but someone needs to lead the horses around."

"She won't go with anyone else," Val said mounting off her white mare and helping Smoke down. "I'll lead her around and Smoke can climb over."

"Right," said Smoke. "I'll climb over."

Butch and Alex got down off their brown gelding and looked at each other.

"I'll do it," they said in unison.

Butch shook his head and Alex laughed.

"No really," Butch said. "Let me."

He reached for the horse's reins and Alex shook her head. "No way, tough guy. You help Smoke."

Stella had already started leading her own brown mare along the tiny strip of road between the pickup and the edge. Butch could hear little pebbles and clots of dirt sliding down the cliff. His heart clenched tight in his chest.

"Okay," he said. "But be careful."

Alex nodded and took the reins from Butch's hand. He watched her turn and follow Val and the white mare, then turned and started

climbing up the side of the pick-up.

He reached down to help Smoke and Tig was right behind him. Then, as they were making the tricky step from the side of the truck to the crumpled hood of the jeep, the driver's side door of the jeep flew open and a slick bloody hand reached up and grabbed Smoke's pant leg. He hollered and fell awkwardly, impaling his throat on the jagged broken windshield wiper. Butch saw the other end of the wiper punch through the back of Smoke's neck. The bells in his dreadlocks jingled merrily as he shuddered and died.

"Shit," Tig shouted, wrestling furiously with the new attacker. The guy was taller and broader than Butch, but nearly skeletal, his face like a skull dipped in red and white wax. Before Butch could even react, Tig and the infected man were falling, tumbling together over the edge.

Butch shouted and threw himself over the jeep and into the road on the far side. Stella, Val and Alex were already on the other side and Stella was on her knees at the edge, cursing. When Butch looked over the edge he saw Tig caught on a little outcrop of rock. The bone in his right leg was protruding from his thigh, blood soaking the leg of his pants. He had lost his rifle and pack in the fall and was moaning, only semi-conscious, but still alive and not infected.

"Oh my God," Alex said. "Look!"

The infected man was below, clinging desperately to handfuls of brush and struggling to climb high enough to reach Tig.

"We've got to do something!" Butch said, opening and closing his fists.

"His leg is broken," Stella said through clenched teeth. "He won't make it."

"But we can't leave him," Alex said. "He's still alive."

Stella put her rifle to her shoulder and fired a single shot. Tig's head rocked back in a burst of crimson and then he was still.

"No he isn't," Stella said. "Let's go."

Butch turned away, nauseous. Tig, who would have left Butch behind in the trap. Tig with his bad jokes and his tiger tattoo. Really Butch didn't know a thing about him, but he felt a hollow sense of hopeless loss now that he was dead. And Smoke, too. The goofy

hippy, who made good coffee and didn't want to be alone. So many people.

It was all starting to overwhelm Butch. He felt like he needed a nap. His hands were shaking. Some action hero. He got back up on the horse behind Alex. Stella and Val were moving along, each alone on their respective mounts. It started to rain. They rode on in silence.

TWENTY-SIX

"We only have about another hour or two of daylight," Stella said. "We need to make camp as soon as possible."

"We haven't seen any infected people in hours," Butch said.

"We haven't seen any people at all," Val replied.

It was true. They had been riding for hours and had seen nothing but uninterrupted green jungle, which was occasionally broken by cliffs and breathtaking mountains. Alex wouldn't have been surprised to see a dinosaur poke its head out from between the ancient trees. A chilly mist had crept up on them as they climbed higher and they were all glad they wore long sleeves and long pants.

Alex's ass was starting to get sore. She seriously couldn't imagine how it must be for Butch. Still, it felt good to have his warm body pressed against her back and his arms around her waist. Something about having him behind her like that, holding on to her as she rode, sent a constant, low-grade electric tingle through her body that was becoming difficult to ignore.

"Look," Stella said.

Alex looked at where Stella was pointing and saw a small wooden sign that read: "CABINAS". It was almost completely overgrown and looked like it had been placed in such a way as to avoid attention rather than attract it. The sign pointed down to a tiny road that would have been easy to miss, even looking right at it.

"It's worth a try," Stella said. "Stay alert everyone.

They turned and headed down the little path. The sun was going down fast, staining the mist a deep bloody crimson.

At the other end of the path was a bigger, more extravagant sign; this one carved from a huge rough-hewn log hanging on chains from a stout rectangular frame. "Campo Coatimundi" it read. There was a carving of a pointy-nosed raccoon with a long striped tail that curved upward to make the C in Coatimundi. Directly ahead was a large, rustic building with a wide, screened-in porch. There was a man on the porch, but it was difficult to make him out in the failing light.

"Who's there?" Stella called, slipping down off her horse and aiming her rifle at the shape behind the screen.

"Well," a deep voice replied, accompanied by the creak of a large man getting up out of a chair onto ancient floorboards. "Looks like you folks arrived in time."

The man pushed the screen door open and came out into the front yard. He was well above six feet tall, with long blond hair pulled back into a neat braid and a well-groomed, reddish beard. Thick and bear-shaped, with a heavy gut and huge arms, he looked like he could have snapped Stella's rifle in half with his bare hands.

"There's no need for that sort of thing," the man said. "This is Costa Rica, not New York City."

Stella frowned. "Are you alone?"

"Yup," the man replied. "Though not anymore I guess. Business is pretty slow up here, but that's the way I like it. Not to be rude, of course. How many cabinas will y'all be renting? I can stable your horses too, for a small additional fee."

"Renting?" Stella nodded back to the rest of them and they all dismounted. "Have you not had any attacks up here?"

"Attacks?" The man threw her a puzzled look. "What the hell are you talking about? Jaguars?"

"He doesn't know," Butch said, incredulous.

"Hey," he said. "Where are my manners? I guess I've been living up here alone too long. Why don't y'all come on in and have a cold drink. You must be tired from your ride."

Stella glanced at Butch and Alex, but Val was already heading in after the big man, so they hitched the horses to a low post and followed.

"Name's Marlowe," the man said. "And this here is Enrique."

Enrique was clearly the model for the creature on the sign. He sat up on his hind legs, his little nose twitching, and darted across the room then climbed up onto Marlowe's big shoulder. "Pleased to meetcha. Would any of you like some nice cold limonada?"

"That would be great," Alex said.

So, in the midst of the madness, they sat down on big worn but comfortable handmade chairs and stretched out in hammocks and

looked out at the setting sun, watching flocks of noisy parrots coming in to roost for the night.

"So what you're telling me," Marlowe said, lighting a pipe and smoking thoughtfully, "is that there's this virus making everyone into homicidal maniacs." He handed a large nut to Enrique who snatched it up and began cracking it against the floor with swift taps. "You'll forgive me if I'm a bit skeptical. And what about this Jason guy, the carrier of the disease?"

Stella did her best to explain everything, but even to Alex, who had lived through it all, it sounded so far fetched when you tried to put it into words.

"Well, zombies and undead killers and all that notwithstanding, those of us who remain among the living need to eat. I've got some fried chicken in the icebox. Anybody hungry?"

To be sitting in the middle of the wild jungle with a coatimundi at the table and guns substituting as weird but deadly silverware, it seemed utterly surreal to be eating fried chicken, biscuits and potato salad. It was damn good too! Alex realized that the real torture of this living nightmare was that they were trapped in lulls such as this—ordinary moments when madness was forgotten and Alex could remember what life used to be like. If it was a nonstop battle, it might have been easier to keep going, to get numb to it all and not think beyond the next severed head. But sitting beside Butch, feeling comfortably full and cozy and safe somehow seemed to hurt even more, because it reminded her of what she had to lose.

From the moment they arrived, Val was all googoo eyed over their burly host. It made Alex smile to see the tough as nails Val going all soft and girly and batting her lashes. Marlowe clearly noticed her attention and seemed baffled, but pleased.

"Okay, listen up lovebirds," Stella said. "Just because there have been no infected people up here yet does not mean we can let our guard down. I'll take the first watch, but I want everyone here in the main house. Stay close and don't forget that I still have this."

She gestured to the scrambling device on her belt. In all the fighting and chaos, Alex had almost forgotten about those

contraptions on their heads. It would be so good to get the damn things removed.

"If y'all want to clean up, there's a pump out back," Marlowe said. "It's cold but it'll do. You can have your pick of the guest rooms. I'll be down at the end of the hall there."

"Stay alert everyone," Stella said again. "We can't afford to lose anyone else."

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Val felt as if her entire universe had been turned upside down a hundred times. She no longer felt any connection to God or to her deceased father and husband. She felt utterly alone in the world and was deeply confused and conflicted at every turn. Here she was, stuck in this endless bloody nightmare with mud people and liberal race traitors, but those people, especially Stella, had helped her, saved her life even. She was finding it harder and harder to think of Stella as less than human, and that little scrap of doubt put everything she'd been taught to believe in jeopardy. She wanted to believe that it was all part of the test that the Lord was putting her through, but it all seemed so random and hopeless. She was losing faith.

Then they met Marlowe. A strong, powerful, independent Caucasian like Val had been dreaming of. Good healthy stock, skilled in wilderness survival, with nice big chunk of land to call his own. She was head over heels in love the moment she laid eyes on him. Could this be God's plan for her? Had He been leading her to Marlowe all this time? Could it be that the reason she had never conceived with James was because of his sin, not hers? She did not know, but she planned to find out.

It had been ridiculously easy to get Marlowe into bed. He had not been with a woman in over a year and seemed amazed that she really wanted him. She was not experienced with men, since she had only ever been with James, and it had been her father's decision to marry them. She had never deliberately seduced a man in her life and she

found it perversely delicious. Touching his big hand, his barrel chest, looking up into his pure blue eyes; showing him that she wanted him, all these things were new and exciting to Val. He was so much more of a man than James had been, and he made her feel things she had never felt before. When they lay together, spent and sweat-slick in each other's arms, she decided that she would stay there with Marlowe. If she went back to the States, she would surely be arrested and put back in that hellish prison. She would not allow that to happen. She and Marlowe could be safe here. Build a wall. Have babies. Be happy.

Val had almost drifted off to sleep when a stealthy sound woke her suddenly. Her hand searched for the .45 before she was fully awake, and her body rolled away and out of the bed as a blur of movement came down swiftly behind her. But her hand found only the small metal rectangle of Marlowe's Zippo lighter. In her foolish state of arousal, she had left her rifle and .45 in the main room with the other equipment and her clothes. The only weapon in the room was Marlowe's machete, and it was on his side of the bed. Stupid. She was naked and unarmed, crouching to face her attacker, but it was not another infected person.

It was Jason. The one in the hockey mask the others had been talking about. Val had never really believed all those crazy stories, but looking at the unbendable nearly seven foot tall truth of him, she had no choice but to believe.

The hulking nightmare in the white mask held the handle of a rusty pitchfork. The tines of the fork were buried in Marlowe's throat. Thick droplets of dark blood dripped from Jason's eye and fingertips, splashing down on Marlowe's face and chest. Marlowe was making a horrible gurgling sound like water going down a partially clogged drain. Val felt a kind of horrible, icy fury gush through her body. How could this happen when everything was falling into place? Why was everything she cared about taken away?

She did not make a sound as Jason yanked back the pitchfork and Marlowe's big body began to convulse and shudder. She sucked in a deep breath and turned to run. She closed the door behind her and made for the main room.

Val found Stella at the other end of the hallway, dressed and armed, eyes wide in the light cast by her flashlight.

"Val, get dressed," Stella said. "Jason is here. The tracking device —"

"No shit," Val said. "He killed Marlowe." She reached for her pants and her machete. "Come on," she said, slipping into her pants, tucking the Zippo into her hip pocket for luck. "We can't leave him like that."

"Right," Stella said. "I'll cover you.

The two of them crept back down the hallway toward the closed door. Val had not bothered to put on her shirt and her bare skin prickled with goose bumps. There was no noise coming from the room. The door was unlocked, yet it remained closed. Val put her ear to the door. No sound.

Val motioned with her chin for Stella to cover her. Stella nodded and then Val kicked the door open and raised the machete above her head.

The room was empty. There was a huge congealing lake of blood on the bed and sloppy streaks across the floor, leading to the window. The screen had been torn away and the ragged edges flapped in the light breeze. The pitchfork was still there, lying beside Marlowe's discarded pile of clothing. Marlowe's machete was gone.

"Dammit," Val said.

"We need to warn Butch and Alex," Stella said.

***

Alex had sworn to herself that they would rest tonight, not get carried away, but it was impossible. The thin, lumpy bed was uncomfortable and she was too wound up to sleep. Plus Butch was there with his big, calloused hands caressing her thighs, tracing the shape of her gracilis muscles beneath her skin and making her melt against him. Before she knew it, they were at it again and rather than the slow, gentle pace of the night before, Butch seemed intensely driven, almost crazy with an infectious, almost animalistic passion. He threw her weight around the room effortlessly, but as he stood,

lifting her, he stopped, laughing suddenly, then cursing and hopping on one foot.

"Costa Rica sex tip number three hundred and twenty-eight," Butch said, putting Alex back down on the bed and pulling a large splinter from the ball of his foot. "Wear shoes."

She laughed too and they put their boots on, giggling like kids as he lifted her again and carried her across the room.

He had her pinned against the wall, right beside a large window with no glass, only a screen. Alex had the heel of her hand stuffed into her mouth to keep from crying out and waking the others, but the sounds trapped inside her mouth were getting stronger and stronger.

When the thick blade of a machete tore through the rusty screen inches from her face, Alex dropped her hand and screamed for real.

"Shit!" Butch said, stumbling back awkwardly. "Holy shit!"

Jason was pushing his way through the screen and Alex ducked under a rough, handmade wooden table as he brought the machete down with a solid *thunk* into the tabletop. Butch was beside her lifting one end of the table and she nodded and grabbed the other side. Together they tried to push Jason back using the thick table as a shield. It was like trying to push a truck. Alex could feel herself slipping backward along with Butch as Jason forced them both back. He pulled the blade of the machete free from the tabletop and drove it in again and again. The wood was beginning to splinter.

As they skidded closer to the door, Butch looked back over his shoulder. "Do you remember if the door opens in or out?"

"What?" Alex couldn't seem to get her mind around that simple question.

"The door," Butch said. They were less than a foot away from the doorway. "We better hope it opens out."

Then the thick legs of the table hit the wall on either side of the door.

"Go!" Butch shouted.

Alex turned and opened the door. It did open out and she and Butch were able to slip through, buying a handful of precious seconds while Jason smashed through the table.

They made for the front door and out into the driveway. It wasn't until they saw Val and Stella that they realized they were naked except for their boots.

"Well?" Stella said, eyeing Butch's naked body. Alex could have killed her if they didn't have bigger fish to fry.

"Fuck," Val said. "Oh fuck."

"Marlowe," Stella said.

They backed away through the rectangular frame that held the Campo Coatimundi sign as their naked and infected host came tearing down the path. Val raised the barrel of her rifle and shot not at him, but at the heavy sign, first one chain, then the other. The massive log smashed down on Marlowe as he passed beneath it, trapping him under its enormous weight. As he hissed and squirmed, Val turned away with eyes squeezed shut. It was the first time Alex had seen anything even close to emotion in Val's hard features. Alex wondered what had become of Enrique the coatimundi. She hoped fiercely that he was okay.

Stella stepped around the sign and Marlowe, as if planning to return to the house.

"Are you crazy?" Butch asked.

The screen door banged open and Jason appeared on the porch.

"Here comes the main event," Stella said, down on one knee and swiftly assembling something from her pack. "If we can take him down and bring him back to Dr Cain's, we will have killed two birds with one stone."

"You think you're gonna tranquilize that fucking monster?" Val said, a sharp edge of near hysteria in her voice. "He'll kill and infect us all."

"Just calm down," Stella said, drawing a bead on the advancing Jason. "We can do this."

She squeezed off a dart and Alex saw it bounce harmlessly off Jason's mask.

"Shit," she said softly, backing toward the fallen sign and reloading with amazingly steady hands.

She raised the barrel of the tranquilizer gun when Marlowe grabbed her leg. Her shot went wild and Jason was closing in,

swinging with the machete, when Val suddenly tackled Stella, knocking her out of Jason's path. Butch had grabbed Val's rifle and fired repeatedly at Jason. The bullets backed him up a few steps but did not take him down. Together, Stella and Val rolled back and away. They scrambled to their feet.

"You saved me," Stella said, incredulous.

"Only because you have the thing that's keeping my head from blowing off," Val replied with a smirk, but somehow Alex did not entirely believe her.

"Fuck," Stella said, grabbing Val's forearm. "You're cut."

There was a big bleeding gash on Val's arm, so deep that Alex could see a gleam of white bone at the widest point in the cut.

"I know," Val said, pulling a Zippo lighter from the hip pocket of her pants "But I'm taking that fucker with me. Run!"

Val ran past Jason, hollering at the top of her lungs.

"Come on you fucker!" she screamed. "You son of a bitch! You think you can fuck with Valkyrie Randall?"

She ran to the side of the porch and grabbed a large white metal cylinder with a large valve at the top. Alex recognized it as the same kind of container that held the kerosene for her father's barbecue grill back in Homer. Jason turned toward Val as she fumbled with the valve.

"Come on!" Stella said, grabbing Alex's arm. "Move!"

Alex turned away as Jason grabbed Val by the throat and the kerosene caught—an orange wash of fire lit up the night.

Alex ran, heart beating wildly, breath like iron in her chest. They ran and ran for what felt like a year until Alex noticed that Stella was starting to fall behind. She was limping heavily.

Alex called out to Butch. "Stop, wait!"

The three of them stopped. Stella did not look good at all. She was grayish and slick with sweat. Her eyes were bright and terrified. Sludgy crimson tears rolled down her cheeks. The beam from her flashlight was unsteady in the darkness.

"I think..." she said and then turned away and vomited against a tree trunk.

"She's infected," Butch said.

"Marlowe," Alex said.

Stella pulled up her pant leg, revealing a puffy, swollen scrape on her ankle where Marlowe had clawed her. With shaking hands, she removed the GPS locater from her wrist, hit some buttons and pressed it into Alex's hand.

"This will show you the way to Dr Cain's," Stella said.

"What about the scrambler?" Butch asked. "We can't go anywhere without that."

Stella reached down to a pouch on her belt but before she could reach the scrambler, she started to shake, eyes rolling wildly.

Butch grabbed Stella and forced her to the ground. She dropped her flashlight and it shattered, leaving them in total blackness.

Alex was terrified. She couldn't see her hand in front of her face but she could hear Stella hissing and spitting and Butch cursing.

"Get the machete from her belt," Butch said.

"Are you crazy?" Alex asked. "I can't see a fucking thing. What if she bites me?"

"I've got her head down in the dirt," Butch said. "Hurry."

Alex got down on her knees and felt blindly across the damp jungle floor until her fingers encountered cloth and a flailing limb—a leg, Stella's leg, Alex hoped. She followed the leg up toward the waist and met bare skin, Butch's leg.

"Higher up," Butch said.

Finally Alex felt the distinctive shape of the machete's leather sheath and pulled the blade free.

"Where is her head?" Alex asked.

"Just a few inches down from mine," Butch replied, grunting as Stella flew into a fit of desperate struggling. "You're not going to be able to swing the machete or you'll hit me. You'll have to find her neck and power through it."

"Right," Alex said.

She reached out and felt the stubbly texture of Butch's cheek.

"That's me," Butch said. "Now go down about four inches."

She followed his directions and felt the hot skin of Stella's neck. The muscles beneath were twisting furiously like the muscles of an

angry snake. Alex pressed the sharp side of the blade against Stella's neck.

"Okay," Alex said. "Watch out."

With both hands on the handle and a boot on the tip, Alex pushed down hard, see-sawing the blade back and forth as it sank into Stella's neck. Alex worked the edge between the vertebrae and pushed as hard as she could. There was a furious shriek and then silence as Alex felt the machete bite into the dirt below.

"Alex?" Butch said from somewhere to her left. "Alex, you did it."

She reached shaking hands out toward the sound of his voice. When she touched him, he pulled her tightly into his arms. Alex had completely forgotten that they were both naked. The adrenaline was wearing off and it was starting to get chilly.

"Where are we?" Alex asked.

"I have no idea," Butch replied.

"Naked and lost in the jungle at night with no flashlight," Alex said. "Wonderful."

"We'll have to wait for the sun to come up," Butch said.

"Well what the hell are we supposed to do until then?" Alex wrapped her arms tighter around Butch, resting her cheek against his shoulder.

"I don't know," Butch said.

Alex laughed out loud when she felt him hardening against her belly. "You have got to be kidding."

He wasn't.

TWENTY-SEVEN

A green twilight was creeping through the jungle canopy and Alex could see first the shape of Butch's head and shoulders in the gloom, then the details of his exhausted features. She was also able to make out Stella's headless corpse and her scattered pack beside the broken flashlight. The jungle was alive with a million sounds as birds announced the morning. Flies were waking up too, and settling in for breakfast on Stella's body and severed head. They were already swarming around Stella's bulging eyes that it looked like she was wearing dark sunglasses.

"We need to try and find something to wear," Butch said. "And the scrambler for the cameras."

"We need bug repellent," Alex said. "Or I'm not gonna make it."

Butch bent and removed Stella's equipment-laden belt. "I have no idea which one of these things is the scrambler. So we better take everything."

Alex retrieved Stella's pack. Inside was a single change of clothing, pants and a shirt plus a tiny pink thong. No bra.

"Great," Butch said. "None of this is going to fit me."

"Here," Alex said, taking the long sleeved shirt and tying the sleeves around Butch's waist so that the body of the shirt hung down over his butt. She then pulled the body of the shirt between his legs and tucked it under the sleeves around his waist, forming something like a Sumo wrestler's diaper.

"Wow," Butch said, looking down at his new outfit. "That's lovely."

"Look," Alex said, slipping on the thong. "It's better than nothing. At least it will protect little Butch from chiggers and snakes and things."

"Good thinking," Butch said, smiling.

Alex had to use the machete to hack the pants into shorts since she couldn't fit her muscular thighs into the legs of Stella's pants. She buckled Stella's belt around her waist, settling it low on her hips. She was able to fashion a top out of the fabric from the two pant legs, but she was pretty sure that it would fall right off if they had to fight or

run. They slathered themselves with sunscreen and bug repellent and consulted the GPS device Stella had given them.

"Can't you use that to see where Jason is?" Butch asked. "See if he's following us?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "I don't want to push any buttons because I'm afraid we'll lose the way to Dr Cain's lab."

Butch shook his head. "Well, we better get going then."

***

Alex was so burnt out and exhausted that she felt nothing when they finally reached Dr Cain's lab. It was situated in a sprawling compound that looked like something Smoke might have built if he were ten years older and a millionaire. It clung to the side of a sheer mountain with breathtaking views all the way down to the ocean. There was a wall like the one around Smoke's compound, but no visible doorbell or intercom and no amount of banging on the gate produced any result. It took several long minutes of trial and error for them to figure out how to use the radio in Stella's pack.

"This is Dr Cain," a rich, silky voice spoke up from the speaker. "To whom am I speaking?"

"This is Butch Mahan," Butch said. "Stella and Tig and everyone are all dead. It's me and Alex..." He looked at Alex, eyebrows forming a silent question.

"Oh," Alex said. "Uh, Coyle. Alex Coyle."

"Alex Coyle," Butch said into the radio.

"Contestants, correct?" Dr Cain asked.

"That's right," Butch replied. "Stella said you can take these cameras off."

Instead of an answer, there was a low buzz and the gate began to slide open automatically. Unsure of what else to do, they went inside.

Everything was made to blend in to the natural surroundings. There were several huge, ancient trees inside the walls and the houses had been built organically around them. There was a large, pristine swimming pool reflecting the flawless sky, and every inch of outdoor space was landscaped with stunning tropical flora of all

varieties and colors. It looked more like a spa for rich ladies to recover from their facelifts than any kind of scientific facility.

When the woman in the white coat appeared from a lush green archway, she looked far more like she was ready to daub mud on them and put cucumbers on their eyes than splice DNA or cure viruses. She was gorgeous and made Alex intensely uncomfortable until she met her cold gray gaze and realized that this woman was not even remotely interested in Butch.

"I'm Dr Helen Cain," she said.

"Butch," Butch said, holding out a hand for her to shake. She looked at his offered hand as if he had exposed himself.

"I don't shake hands," she said. "It's highly unsanitary, especially in an environment such as this." She turned to Alex. "You must be Alex. Follow me."

They followed Dr Cain into a beautiful bungalow like some tropical honeymoon suite. It was furnished in a cozy, faux-rustic style with fragrant bunches of fresh flowers on every surface. There was a fireplace in one corner and a patio with two colorful hammocks. The bathroom was ridiculously luxurious and the queen-sized bed was veiled in delicate white mosquito netting. It was yet another totally surreal moment in a seemingly endless string of surreal moments. There they were, filthy, sweaty, barely dressed in scraps and rags, having been through eighteen different kinds of hell, having battled zombies and sharks and let's not forget Jason. But despite all that they made it here, to this million dollar love nest. It didn't seem possible for things to get any weirder.

"Get cleaned up," Dr Cain said. "I've provided a good antibacterial soap and I suggest you use that rather than that homemade llama-oil and seaweed junk. When you are finished, come to my lab and I'll remove those cameras."

"Where's the lab?" Alex asked.

"It's located in what was formerly the garage. Just follow the tire tracks. Don't worry, though. I can assure you that it is clean."

Without another word, she turned on her heel and left.

In the bathroom, they found a bottle of medicinal-smelling green liquid soap. Alex cast a longing glance at the wonderfully fragrant

nut-brown cake of handmade soap by the sink. It seemed so much nicer than the awful green stuff, but Dr Cain had been quite insistent, so Alex ran some hot water in the large tub and began to peel off the sticky rags. Butch stood beside her and did the same. When they slipped naked into the steaming water, only the thought of finally being free of those awful camera rigs allowed them to scrub down quickly and avoid falling back into lovemaking again. The harsh, unpleasant hospital smell of the soap helped too, cutting through any kind of sensuality like a stern chaperone. They scrubbed and rinsed repeatedly. Then they bundled up in clean white robes and rubber flip-flops. Alex slipped the scrambler off Stella's belt and into one large pocket and they went to find Dr Cain.

The garage was fairly easy to locate. There was a large rugged jeep and a pick-up truck with a cage bolted to the bed parked outside the roll up door. A smaller human sized door on the far side of the building was left unlocked. They poked their heads cautiously inside.

Inside was far more like what one would imagine. Clean, white, well lit and filled with mysterious equipment. Machines doing various busy jobs; computers displaying unfathomable calculations; and Dr Cain in the middle of it all, regarding a vial of something as clear and unremarkable as water.

On the far side of the room, behind a wall of glass, there were several large cages. Expecting rats or monkeys, they discovered that the cages contained infected people. The glass room was heavily soundproofed so Alex could hear nothing but the self-important hum of the machines, but she could see that the infected people were shrieking, flinging themselves ceaselessly against the bars of their cages.

She shuddered and looked away.

"There you are," Dr Cain said. She set the vial down in a metal rack of similar vials, removed her gloves and turned to wash her hands in a steel sink.

"I am not a medical doctor so I am neither qualified nor willing to administer general anesthesia." She put on fresh gloves and motioned them over to a steel table. "I will use a local to numb the area, but it will still be quite painful. Nonetheless, I will need you to

be still. If you feel that you will not be able to remain still for the duration of the procedure, I will be happy to provide restraints."

Butch's eyes went wide. "Jesus," he said softly.

"I'll go first," Alex said, pushing down her fear and stepping up to the table. She knew that if she had to watch Butch first she would lose her nerve.

"Excellent," said Dr Cain. "Let's get started."

***

After the horrible procedure was complete for both of them, Alex was still in a lot of pain, but she was so utterly exhausted that she fell into a dead sleep almost the instant her head hit the pillow. Dr Cain had assured them that she would fill them in on everything in the morning but then, Alex wanted nothing more than sleep.

Morning seemed to come far too soon. Alex woke with a spitting headache and, though she'd never been much of a drinker, she imagined this was what it would feel like to be hungover. In spite of the awful pulse of pain in her skull, she was thrilled to finally be free of the camera.

Butch woke beside her and moaned, fingers pressed against his temple.

"Oh, baby," he said. "I feel like road kill."

"Me too," Alex said.

He leaned over and rested his head on her shoulder. She put her arms around him and pulled him close, wishing for the billionth time that this was over, that they were somewhere, anywhere but here.

"We better go find the good doctor," Alex said. "See about this plan of hers to capture Jason."

"We will in a few minutes," Butch said, burrowing between her breasts like he was trying to hide. "I want a few more minutes in a world where none of this is happening."

"I know," Alex said softly, stroking his hair. It was getting longer now. When the game began it was almost shaved. How many days ago was that? It seemed like years.

"Alex..." he said looking up at her, but whatever he wanted to say trailed off and he pressed his face back into her breasts.

"I know," she said again. "I know."

Dr Cain had provided some clean and generic clothing that almost fit and was way better than the scraps left over from Stella's pack. A silent, older Tica woman arrived with breakfast and coffee. They ate in silence. With food and caffeine in her system, the dull thump of her residual headache started to fade and it wasn't long before their new clothes were on the floor and they were back in the bed. With everything they'd been through, Alex couldn't stand the thought of putting anything off, not even for a minute. They could die the moment they walked out the door.

When they were dressed again and as ready as they would ever be, they went to find Dr Cain in the lab.

"I see you are awake," Dr Cain said. "Allow me to fill you in on the details of this situation. The..." She paused. "The individual known as Jason Voorhees has been infected with a mutated strain of a designer virus that I created. When DNA from Jason was spliced into my virus, a spontaneous mutation occurred, and once freed from its sterile container, the virus infected Jason and all the normal humans around him. It is transmitted through the blood—blood that weeps copiously from Jason's skin, eyes, and every other orifice, coating his weapons and dripping into the open wounds of his victims. When normal humans are infected, it gives them a kind of immortality. They too can pass on the infection through contact with contaminated blood. You are extremely lucky to have made it this far."

Alex listened with growing disbelief. It was almost too much to take in.

"I have the antivirus prepared to counteract the Jason Strain," Dr Cain continued. "But it needs another twenty-four hours to reach sufficient strength to release it into the atmosphere." She indicated a long narrow compartment at the base of a tube leading up through the low ceiling. "I've harnessed my own antivirus to the common cold. A kind of 'viral carjacking', if you will. It will easily spread throughout the human population in the affected area. Those who

are infected will die without the Jason Strain to animate their bodies and those who are not will be rendered immune. I have rigged this device to automatically release the antivirus once it has achieved the desired potency." She frowned and looked away. "In the unlikely event that something should happen to me before full potency has been reached."

"Right," Butch said. "But what about Jason himself?"

"Jason is the carrier and the virus inside him is extremely potent. The first generation. The common cold cannot penetrate his system because he is not technically alive, as we understand it. To completely eliminate the virus inside Jason, the pure antivirus must be injected directly into his brain. The best method would be through the eye." She turned away, nodding to herself. "Yes, the eye."

"Stella said you had a plan to recapture Jason," Alex said.

"Ah yes," Dr Cain said. "Of course. Let me explain."

TWENTY-EIGHT

Julia Deitz was still not used to the idea of men flirting with her. She had always been overweight and painfully shy, but when she woke up on the morning of her eighteenth birthday, she decided it was time to change things. She lost sixty-five pounds that year and made an effort to be more active and adventurous. To take chances. A week after she turned nineteen, her older sister Melinda and her husband, Gabe, had talked Juila into coming along on this trip to Costa Rica. Julia was having the time of her life.

She had been a little nervous about the zip tour. It sounded so crazy, the idea of hooking yourself to a wire and whizzing through the canopy like a flying squirrel. Still, it had to be safe, since it was so popular and so many other guests at the lodge had raved about how great it was. She hiked bravely along, up higher and higher through the winding trails until they reached a rickety wooden platform high up on the level of the treetops. Gabe and Mel had hooked up and jumped off, whizzing away into the swirling mist with joyful cries trailing behind them. There were six people in their group, along with the two guides, and everyone had gone down already except for Julia and one of the guides, a handsome young Tico named Luis. He was checking her helmet and hooking her harness up to the wire, all the while flirting outrageously with her.

"Don't worry, beautiful lady," he told her. "José will be there to catch you on the other end. Now put on your gloves."

Julia blushed and stepped up to the edge of the platform, slipping on the heavy gloves she had been given. Her heart was pounding, breath tight in her chest. It didn't help that she could not see the bottom. If she could see Mel at the bottom, waving up at her, she would feel more confident. But the wire seemed to disappear into the mist. At the beginning of the tour, Luis had explained to her that if she got scared and didn't want to do it, she didn't have to. They could always walk back down and meet the group at the bottom. But Julia did not want Mel to tease her for the rest of the trip for being a big baby. Plus the idea of a long walk alone in the jungle with that

dashing scoundrel Luis was even more intimidating than sliding down the wire. She took a deep breath, clenched her gloved fists and stepped off the edge of the platform.

Rushing though the canopy, wind whipping her long braid from side to side, Julia felt a surge of breathless exhilaration. It was amazing, unlike anything she'd ever experienced. It really was like flying, like being transformed for a fleeting moment into some exotic parrot sailing effortlessly though the jungle.

Then the cool, fragrant mist closed around her, throwing a delicate gauzy veil over everything. She thought she could make out the other guide standing on the lower platform with his arms out, but he looked much taller than she remembered and his face was too white, almost like a mask of some kind.

As she flew toward him, she saw other people in the group too, but they were all lying down or crouching on their hands and knees. There were splashes of lurid crimson everywhere, and Julia realized that it was blood at the exact moment that she realized that the man waiting for her at the platform was not José at all. Whoever he was, he was holding a huge gory machete and Julia was headed straight for it.

She screamed and kicked, trying desperately to grab the wire above her to slow her decent. The wire sliced through her gloves, tearing into the palms of her hands, and she continued speeding inevitably down toward the upheld machete.

***

"Come on," Butch whispered. "Turn the damn thing on."

"I'm trying," Alex replied, fumbling with the controls on the backpack-like device that Dr Cain had given her.

The pack made a strange, oscillating electronic hum.

"Is it on?" Alex asked. "I don't think it's working."

Butch shook his head.

There was a horrible scream as another one of the hapless tourists came down the zip line. Butch tried to look away as Jason's machete chopped the pretty young brunette lengthwise, nearly in half. Her

organs dropped out in a wet pile and her body tumbled from the harness and onto the platform with the others. The carnage on the platform was unspeakable. The few who had not been totally dismembered were struggling to stand on whatever limbs they had left, slipping in the blood and bile and clumps of still-quivering meat.

The sound coming from the pack on Alex's back suddenly intensified, sliding higher in pitch, and Jason turned his masked face toward the noise.

"Shit," Butch said. "He's coming."

"Dammit!" Alex flipped the switch again and again.

Jason had spotted them. Butch could see the bright glint of his hateful gaze in the dark eyehole as he moved toward them. His clothing had been charred and there were raw patches of sticky burned flesh on his arms and neck, but he seemed otherwise unharmed by Val's brave, suicidal attack. He was still oozing infected blood from every inch of his skin and the holes in his mask. Behind him, several of the more intact infected came staggering along, reaching hungrily toward them. Unbelievably, the bifurcated brunette was actually back up on her feet. Butch found himself thinking of the "Legs all the way up to her chin" phrase, as she wobbled awkwardly toward them. Only her collar bones and a thin strip of pectoral muscle held the two halves of her body together beneath her nodding, crooked head.

Butch heard a string of terrified Spanish curses and then another man came down the wire, landing in the midst of the carnage. The infected people turned and flung themselves at the newcomer. He screamed as they sank their teeth into his arms and legs, pulling him down into the pile of mutilated bodies.

Butch unsheathed his own machete, wondering if it was all over, if they had been crazy to trust Dr Cain and her stupid machine, when suddenly the hum from the pack evened out and a flash of light enveloped Alex, colored embers racing over the surface of her body and then, to Butch's amazement, she was someone else.

An older woman, with short dirty-blonde hair, thick cheeks and dark eyes. She wore a mannish white sweater and dark pants with heavy-duty boots. Pamela Voorhees. Jason's mother.

"Stop!" Alex said, only it wasn't Alex's normal sexy-rough, sandpaper voice. It sounded like someone totally different.

Jason stopped dead in his tracks.

"Jason!" Alex said. "Enough. Come with me now, Jason."

She started to back away. Jason let the machete drop to the dirt.

"This way, Jason," Alex said with that unfamiliar voice. "Quickly."

Butch ducked back to let Jason pass. They left the infected people tearing bloody chunks out of the unfortunate guide and made their way back down to the truck. It was intensely disturbing to Butch to watch this total stranger, knowing it was really Alex. He could occasionally see little scraps of digital noise around the cuffs of the sweater or around the edges of the mouth when she spoke, but otherwise the illusion was flawless.

"In here, Jason," Alex said, stepping up into the cage welded to the bed of the truck. "Come on."

Jason followed Alex into the cage and Butch's heart was in his throat. He hated her being so close to that masked maniac.

"That's it," she said, beckoning him in.

As she backed away from him and into the front wall of the cage, she bumped the pack against the bars. It frizzed out in a rush of static, revealing Alex beneath the holographic illusion. Jason clenched his fists and charged at her, grabbing her and slamming her into the bars.

"Fuck!" Alex shouted. "Hit the reset button!"

She grunted and Jason slammed her again and again into the bars, big hands squeezing her throat. Butch scrambled up the side of the cage and reached for the button on the pack. His fingers nearly touched it but Jason swung her away. He reached again and again until finally he was able to punch the button. There was another burst of light as the image of Jason's mother obscured Alex's deep red asphyxiating face. Jason let go and stumbled back, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"You are bad, Jason," Alex said and even through the voice transformer, Butch could hear how swollen her throat was. "You are a bad, naughty boy. You stay right here and think about what you did. Stay right here."

Alex inched past the slump-shouldered and chagrined Jason. He would not meet her gaze as she passed, head down and looking at his bloody boots. The second she was out of the cage, Butch slammed the door and locked it. Jason did not react.

"I did it," Alex whispered. "I think."

Butch wanted to hug her close, but he didn't want Jason having some kind of psycho freak-out about some guy putting the moves on mommy, so he nodded and helped her into the cab of the truck.

***

For the entire drive back to Dr Cain's, Jason was sitting in the back of the truck with his knees pulled up to his chin, rocking back and forth. Alex had no idea what his history was or what his relationship with his mother had been like, but clearly Dr Cain had been right that the image of his mother would have a profound effect. Alex had thought of Jason as a heartless, mindless killer all this time, but she wasn't so sure. Was there still something human left inside him, some ancient fragment of emotional connection? He was clearly feeling something, locked into his own unknowable torment as he banged the back of his head again and again into the cab of the truck while they drove. In a way she almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

When they came up to the gate of the compound, it was already open. Butch maneuvered the truck slowly up the drive while Alex peered warily through the trees. There was a new vehicle in the spot where the truck had been parked. It was a heavy military-style jeep, but black. Butch hit the breaks as several men in black fatigues ran up to the truck and shoved gun barrels into the open windows.

"Shit," Butch said. "What the hell is this?"

"Get out," one of the armed men said. "Both of you."

Alex heard the distinct sound of a helicopter. Above them a chopper was coming in to land behind the lab. The wind from the blades whipped Alex's hair around her face and she took a step closer to Butch.

A young man with a trendy haircut and expensive designer khakis came storming around the corner of the building. He had a cellphone

glued to his ear and was shouting into it.

"Yeah, that's right," he said. "I'm here now. I don't know yet, that's why I'm here. Look, shut up and listen. I told you I'm handling it. Have I ever let you down? If I say I'm on it, then I'm fucking on it. Look, Jason is here. I've gotta go. I'll call you back, all right. Just relax, okay. I'm on it."

The trendy guy flipped the phone closed. "Okay. What do you have for me?"

An older man with a serious, deep lined face stepped forward.

"We have two contestants and Jason, sir," he said. "The scientist has been neutralized, as have the three domestics."

Alex looked over by the door to the lab and saw Dr Cain lying in a crumpled bloody heap. An awful despair washed over her.

"Okay," the trendy guy stepped up to Butch and Alex. "Butcher and the bodybuilder. Right." He looked them over like they were leftovers in the fridge and was deciding if they were still edible. "I'm Caleb Carson, the producer of *Xtreme Elimination*. I'm here to save the bleeding mess that is left of my show. Kenworth and his men will escort you and Mr Voorhees back to the airfield. From there my own private jet will be waiting to take you back to Hollywood. We'll finish the season there."

Caleb turned to go, already talking on his cellphone again.

"Gerda, get me Berman. What do you mean he's in the hospital? So? Don't they have phones in the hospital?"

Then he was gone, helicopter noisily retreating back into the sky. Butch looked incredulously at Alex. She was stunned.

"You don't understand," Butch said as a pretty blonde woman with a serious expression prodded him with the barrel of a gun. "You can't take Jason back to the States. He's contagious."

"Shut up and get in the jeep," she said.

"No way!" Alex said. "We can't let you do this. It's insane."

The blonde shoved Alex roughly toward the jeep. She staggered against the wheelbase and heard the pack on her back boot up with a powerful hum.

Alex stepped between the blonde and Butch. "We're not going."

Another man came forward and raised the butt of his gun. He let Alex have it, and as the pain exploded in her temple and she staggered to her knees at the blonde woman's feet, she heard the sound of the hologram engaging around her.

"Jason!" Alex cried. "Help me, Jason!"

When Jason saw the pretty blonde girl standing over his mommy, a bolt of white-hot fury shot though him and he leapt to his feet. She looked so familiar, this blonde girl. He knew he had seen her somewhere before and he realized with sudden horror that he did recognize her. It was Alice, that blonde counselor from Camp Crystal Lake. Alice was trying to hurt his mommy, again. He thought that he had got rid of that blonde bitch once and for all, but here she was again, standing over his injured mommy and ready to cut off her head. Things often seemed mixed up and confusing for Jason, but there were moments of pure clarity and this moment was as clear as any he'd ever had. He had to save his mommy from Alice. He had not been able to save her before, but, here in this strange and unfamiliar place that was so unlike Crystal Lake, he had somehow been given another chance. He knew what he had to do.

"Get the gun!" the blonde woman yelled as Jason smashed through the bars of the cage. "Hurry!"

Butch helped the disguised Alex to her feet while Caleb's minions scattered before the furious Jason. Together Butch and Alex ran to the fallen Dr Cain.

She was still alive, barely. Enough to flinch back from Butch's touch when he tried to check her wounds.

"Don't," she whispered. "Not clean."

"Dr Cain," Butch said. "What can we do? They are going to take Jason back to America!"

Dr Cain reached a shaking hand into the pocket of her lab coat and pulled out a capped syringe. "In the eye. Remember?" She pressed the syringe into Butch's hand. "The antivirus will be automatically released in four hours but you must..."

Her eyes went unfocused and her body stiffened and then went limp.

"Shit," Butch said, slipping the capped hypo into his pocket. "Now what?"

They turned back to Jason and saw a young man with a strange device that looked like a backpack vacuum cleaner. He was pointing the nozzle at Jason and fumbling with the controls when Jason swung an enormous fist and punched the device. It burst open, gushing nasty-looking gray foam all over the man and Jason. To Butch's surprise, the stuff hardened almost immediately, sticking the man to Jason like a Siamese twin. It was so absurd, hideous, comical and awful as Jason pulled the machete from the guy's belt and sliced off the guy's free hand. Jason continued stabbing the machete into any part of the man's body that wasn't covered in foam, but the angle was awkward. The man was spasming violently, vomiting down the side of Jason's leg as he became infected.

"We can't fight all these guys," Alex said. "What the hell are we going to do?"

"Let Jason kill them all," Butch said. "When he's done, you calm him down long enough for me to..." Butch felt the sudden cold kiss of a muzzle pressed against the back of his sweaty neck.

"Tell your bitch to calm him down now," the blonde girl said, cocking the hammer.

"Alex..." Butch said.

"Do it," the blonde said. "Or I'll blow his fucking brains out."

Seeing the emotional anguish Alex was feeling displayed on this stranger's face was totally bizarre. Butch watched her as she got slowly to her feet and went like a sleepwalker into the middle of the madness.

"Jason," she called. "Stop."

Jason turned toward the sound of the familiar voice. That was all it took. The older man shot two tranquilizer darts into Jason's neck. He took several tentative steps toward Alex and then staggered to his knees, dragging the infected man stuck to his side down with him. A young man with a shaved head came forward and swiftly decapitated the infected man. As Jason's good eye fluttered closed, a thin stink like a model train transformer started coming from the holographic device on Alex's back. Not five seconds after Jason went under, the

device frizzed out, revealing Alex looking beautiful and furious. She pulled the pack from her back and threw it to the ground, where it burst into flames.

The older man started spraying down the unconscious Jason with some sweet-smelling green liquid. The hardened foam dissolved and the headless corpse slumped over to one side. The man with the shaved head kicked the body away.

"Okay," the blonde woman said. "Now where was I?" She pushed Butch forward. "Oh yeah, now I remember. Get in the fucking Jeep."

TWENTY-NINE

By the time they arrived on the small airfield where Caleb's private jet waited to take them back to the States, they were all hot, sweaty and miserable. They'd had more than enough of each other's company halfway through the bumpy, dizzying three hour drive. The blonde seemed to take way too much pleasure in ordering them out of the jeep and down the runway.

Alex watched with a deep sense of hopeless despair as several of the producer's minions loaded the unconscious Jason onto the plane.

"You are making a huge mistake," Butch said. "This is crazy. Just think for a second."

The woman shook her head and pressed a gun to Alex's back.

"I don't get paid to think," she said. "Just get on the fucking plane."

Inside, the private jet was luxuriously appointed, plush, royal blue and black carpeting and buttery black leather seating that was more like a cushy sofa than any kind of airline seat Alex had ever seen. The heavy, mercury cool air conditioning that washed over Alex felt so good after the endless, tropical swelter that for a fraction of a second, she forgot everything else and closed her eyes, feeling the sweat cooling on her back and face. The cranky blonde with the gun escorted them past the Hollywood scumbag, who was yelling into his cellphone again and being served a tiny cup of espresso by a leggy Italian supermodel in a tight, short, blue and black outfit that looked like some Fifties pin-up artist's fantasy of a stewardess uniform.

"I told you," the producer said into the phone. "It's handled. Look, if I say it's handled then it's fucking handled. Period. Just book me a green screen and get Speedway Digital online. We'll fix it in post. Right. If it's a problem throw more money at them. I don't care. No. Fuck Timewave. Timewave will have to wait. Then tell Serena Channing to call me. No, I'm not fucking kidding. You give her this number and I'll tell that bitch..."

Unsurprisingly, the blonde led them back through a padded door and into a much more mundane section of the plane. There were only single seats, one on each side of the aisle and about seven rows.

Behind that, the rest of the seats had been removed and a sturdy metal cage had been built. Jason laid spread eagled on the floor inside the cage, leg and wrist cuffs chained to heavy bolts in the floor.

The blonde sat Alex down in the first left hand seat and cuffed her to the armrest. The guy with the shaved head did the same for Butch on the right hand side. The older guy and the blonde sat directly behind them and the guy with the shaved head sat behind the blonde.

There was no announcement, no explanation of safety features or invitation to watch the in-flight movie. There was merely a gunning of engines pressing Alex back into the seat and then the plane took off, climbing sharply. Alex saw the sheer green mountains wheeling away beneath them and then they rose up into white blank nothingness. By the time they came up out of the clouds, they could have been anywhere.

Alex wished desperately that she didn't have the stupid cuffs locking her down, that there wasn't an aisle between her and Butch. She needed to feel him next to her, to touch him, to feel the reassurance of his closeness, but all they could do was look at each other. They couldn't even really speak freely with all these thugs around. Instead, she tried to send him some kind of wordless message of comfort and connection, but she was feeling more and more hopeless with every passing minute. The producer was clearly out of his mind. He had no idea what sort of horror he was bringing back to Hollywood. Alex only hoped that Butch could find a way to inject Jason with the antivirus before they reached American soil.

As the endless monotony of the flight wore on, Alex's exhaustion got the better of her and she started to drift, her mind wandering in and out of scattered nightmares. She woke suddenly with a cold sweat slicking her body. She wasn't sure exactly what woke her, but she heard a faint rattling of chains and a man's anxious voice behind her.

"Fuck, he's waking up, man!"

"Well," the blonde replied. "Go back there and give him another hit of sleepy juice."

"Fuck that," the man said.

"Shit," a deeper voice said. "Give me that."

Alex craned her neck around to try and see over the back of the seat. She could see Jason's cage out of the corner of her eye. The older man was headed back there with a tranquilizer gun. Instead of trying to shoot through the bars of the cage, the man unlocked the door and walked fearlessly inside. Alex's neck was cramping from twisting back but she could not keep her eyes off the older man as he put one boot on Jason's masked face, forcing Jason's head to one side and aiming point-blank at his neck.

Alex gasped as the plane suddenly dipped and shuddered, snapping her head back against the seat. She heard the pop of the tranquilizer gun and a furious curse, and when she craned her head around again, she saw the older man pulling a jaunty red dart out of his own calf. His eyes rolled up into his head, and his knees buckled as he crumpled down on top of the now fully awake and furious Jason.

"Dammit, Kenworth!" the blonde called, vaulting out of her seat and flying toward the cage, slamming the door and locking it.

"Jason's gonna kill him!" the younger guy said. "Shit man, this is fucked."

"Kenworth is dead already," the blonde replied. "A dose like that would kill a dozen junkies. He's the lucky one. We gotta worry about our own asses."

She backed slowly away from the door as Jason tore himself free of the restraints and stood.

"Get the tranquilizer gun!" the younger man called.

"You get it, genius," the blonde replied. "It's in the fucking cage."

Jason slammed a thick shoulder into the cage door. The bars squealed in protest but held.

The door between the cabins opened and the producer stuck his head in, furious.

"What the hell is going on back here?" he yelled. "Jason's up," the blonde said. "He wants his complimentary in-flight beverage."

Jason slammed against the bars again. They were starting to bend beneath his assault.

"Well, handle it, will you?" the producer said. "I've got Serena fucking Channing on the line up here. What the hell do I pay you people for?"

The producer slammed the door again and the blonde rolled her eyes.

"What the fuck are we supposed to do now?" the younger man asked, voice cracking with hysteria. "We're totally fucked, man!"

Alex started wrenching her arm back and forth in the cuff. If Jason got out while she was cuffed to a chair, it was all over.

"Just give me a second," the blonde said, squeezing her eyes shut.

Jason hit the cage door again and this time knocked it half off its hinges.

"We don't have a fucking second," the young man said.

"Listen," Butch said. "You need to unlock these cuffs."

"What?" the blonde turned to Butch, frowning.

"Yeah, come on," Alex said. "We can help you but if you leave us cuffed like this we're dead meat."

The blonde cocked her head, wary.

"He's coming through!" the young man called.

"Come on!" Butch cried. "It's not like we can get away. We're on a fucking plane. We need to fight together or we're all fucked."

"You want to die for that fucking asshole producer?" Alex asked.

The blonde nodded and tossed Butch the keys. He unlocked his own cuffs and then freed Alex.

"Okay, here's the plan," she said.

"Dina!" the younger man called. "He's out!"

The younger man pulled out a pistol and Dina grabbed his wrist.

"Don't be stupid, RJ," she said. "We're on a plane. In the air. I'd like to keep it that way, okay? I'll distract Jason."

She stepped forward and to Alex's amazement she pulled her shirt off. She was not wearing a bra.

"Come on, big boy," Dina shouted. "Come get some of this!"

Jason, now free of the cage, came barreling down the aisle toward Dina. Dina backed up smooth and steady like a boxer.

"Don't stand there," Dina said out of the corner of her mouth. "Get the fucking tranquilizer gun."

Butch started scrambling up over the backs of the seats. Alex followed and so did RJ, leaping out of Dina and Jason's way as they passed.

"Step on it, will ya," Dina called. "I'm running out of aisle here."

Butch reached the cage first and grabbed the gun, tossing it back to RJ.

"Are there more darts?" Butch asked.

"Kenworth's got 'em," RJ said, holding the tranquilizer gun like an alien artifact.

Butch was rifling the older man's corpse.

"Where?"

Meanwhile Dina had managed to lock herself in the tiny bathroom. Jason was quickly making short work of the flimsy folding door.

"You guys want to speed it up a little?" Alex asked.

Butch had found a single full dart and RJ was trying to load it into the gun with shaking hands. Butch grabbed him by his shirt and pushed him down the aisle toward the furious Jason.

"Shoot," Butch said.

"Hurry!" Alex cried.

"All right, all right already!" RJ raised the barrel. "I've only got one chance here. I gotta make it count."

Jason hit the bathroom door and it splintered. Alex heard Dina let out an angry curse inside and there was a sound of glass breaking. Without thinking, Alex pulled off one of the seat cushions and flung it at Jason. It bounced harmlessly off the back of his head and he turned toward them.

"Shoot for Christ's sake!" Butch yelled.

"I... I..." RJ stammered, backing away.

Before RJ could say another word, Jason reached out and gripped RJ's wrist where he cupped the long barrel of the gun. He screamed and dropped the gun to the carpet. His scream became a highpitched shriek as Jason snapped RJ's wrist and then reached for the machete on his belt.

"Come on!" Butch said, taking Alex's hand and pulling her up over the seats around Jason as he chopped RJ's hand off, spraying the windows on the opposite side with thick crimson gore.

"Dina?" Butch called as he and Alex approached the bathroom. "Dina, are you all right?"

Dina was crumpled on the floor of the bathroom in a scatter of broken mirror shards. When she heard Butch's voice, she pushed herself up on all fours and launched herself at him. Her swollen, bloody eyes were bristling with slivers of broken glass.

"Shit," Butch said. "Open that other door!"

Alex opened the door opposite the little bathroom. It looked to be a small supply closet. As soon as Alex got the door open, Butch kicked the hissing, flailing Dina into the closet and slammed the door, throwing home the latch.

"I don't know how long that's gonna hold," Butch said. "We need to get out of here."

Alex pounded with her fist on the door separating their cabin from the fancy first class area.

"Open this fucking door!" she called.

Jason had let the twitching and bloody mess that used to be RJ fall to the floor and turned, advancing toward them with the gore-streaked machete held high.

"I thought I told you to handle this problem," the producer said through the closed door.

"Goddammit, Caleb or whatever your name is, Alex yelled. "If you don't open this door, I'm gonna kick it down, and if I kick it down we won't be able to shut it again and then you can figure out how to fucking handle your pet monster."

"Caleb," Butch called. "This is the Butcher! You realize that if Jason kills us now, that's the end of your precious show."

The door opened. Caleb reached through and yanked the two of them in, slamming and locking it seconds before Jason hit it with his full weight.

"All right," Caleb said. "We're over the Mexican dessert, north of Guadalajara. We'll be back in Burbank in less than an hour. We have to keep him out until we land."

Alex looked up and saw a huge flat screen television. In a moment of totally surreal fascination, she saw that the screen showed the three of them. Caleb facing the camera and she and Butch facing

away. There were two beautiful stewardesses on the leather couch, watching the screen, mesmerized, as if what they were watching was not happening right beside them

"You really don't get it, do you?" Butch asked. "If you allow Jason to reach Los Angeles while he's still infectious, we're talking the end of TV, the end of ratings, the end of the fucking world. A plague that could wipe out the entire planet."

"Don't be so dramatic, Butcher," Caleb said. "It's all under control."

Jason slammed into the door again.

"You call this under control?" Alex asked.

"You're fucking crazy!" Butch said.

"What the hell do you know about running a hit show?" Caleb spat. "You were nothing before I found you. You were some bare-knuckle trained chimp with a piddly AAFC contract for twenty grand a fight. I don't get out of bed for twenty grand. I spend twenty grand on fucking shoes. The CGI I'm gonna need to rescue this show costs twenty grand a fucking minute. You were nothing before I made you a killer. I made you a fucking star."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Butch asked, frowning.

"You're no killer, you're a fucking pansy ass daddy's boy," Caleb said. "You couldn't even get it up to kill those bimbos in Vegas. I've been tying your shoes for you since day one.'

"What?" Butch's eyes were narrow, voice cold and deadly serious.

"Did you really believe you actually killed those sluts?" Caleb smirked. "I had them killed myself. You couldn't kill a fucking fly."

Butch threw himself at Caleb with a furious curse, but Jason smashed through the door at that precise moment and when Butch turned back to Jason, Caleb slipped away. Jason started for Alex, and the two stewardesses screamed in ear-piercing unison. Jason's masked face turned toward the sound and he lunged for the shrieking women, machete held high

Butch made a swift run for the tranquilizer gun. From the doorway between the cabins, Alex could hear Dina banging faster and harder against the closet door. Alex did not see RJ.

Meanwhile, in the first class cabin, the Italian-looking stewardess had hit Jason with a heavy champagne bottle. Jason's shoulders foamed with expensive champagne like the bow of a recently christened ship. He easily ripped the jagged neck of the bottle from her hand and jammed in into her beautiful face, twisting fiercely and snapping off chunks of thick green glass as the edges chewed up her flawless skin.

Back in the main cabin, Butch was wrestling with RJ, who was infected and hissing, teeth snapping at Butch's face. Butch pulled RJ's gun from the leather holster in his armpit and Alex gasped, thinking of what Dina had said about not firing bullets in the plane. Would the cabin depressurize? Would they be sucked, screaming into the frozen sky? Before she could warn him, Butch fired, not at RJ but at the round window beside them.

There was a violent *crack* and fierce, icy wind blasted through the cabin. Alex had to grip the doorframe with every ounce of strength she had as Butch kicked RJ toward the broken window.

To Alex's amazement, RJ hit the open window with his head. His shoulders were too broad to fit through so he was stuck fast like a cork, still alive and kicking, but trapped in the window. There was a high-pitched sucking sound as air escaped around the edges of his squirming shoulders.

Butch grabbed the tranquilizer gun and came tearing down the aisle toward Alex. Alex ducked out of the way into the main cabin while Butch tried to draw a bead on Jason through the doorway. Inside the first class cabin, the other stewardess was hitting Jason with her stiletto-heeled shoe. Jason backhanded her into the galley where she collapsed into a pile of macadamia nuts in foil packets and hot lemon scented towels. Jason followed her into the narrow space, machete raised.

Butch stood fast, holding the tranquilizer gun and waited for Jason to re-emerge. Alex could hear horrible wet screaming and tearing coming from the galley. A second of silence and Jason reappeared in the doorway, gloved in blood.

"Gotcha," Butch said softly, and pulled the trigger.

The closet door burst open and Dina came screeching out. The dart hit her perfectly in the soft spot between her collarbones. She started toward them, but the tranquilizer was racing though her veins and she went loose and floppy, collapsing to her knees and then down onto her face on the carpet in a pile of magazines, blankets and safety orange parachute packs.

Jason turned away and headed back into the first class cabin. Butch followed, throwing the useless tranquilizer gun aside. Alex bent down to take Dina's machete, and then after a brief second of thought, he reached into the dead woman's pocket and pulled out her wallet. Might come in handy if they survived this mess.

In the first class cabin, Caleb was trying to fend off the dark haired stewardess with all the glass in her face. Caleb kicked her back and away and she stumbled into Jason as the plane hit another pocket of turbulence. Together, the stewardess and Jason fell backward over a low table. Butch fell sideways into Alex but she caught him, steadying herself in the doorway. After the turbulence settled, Alex felt her ears pop. The plane was losing altitude.

Caleb tore open the cockpit door. "What the fuck do you think you are doing? Don't you dare land this plane until we get to Burbank, do you hear me?"

"Fuck you," the pilot responded. "We're making an emergency landing!"

Jason flung the dark haired stewardess off him and she stumbled into Alex. Alex swung the machete, almost enjoying the good solid *thunk* as the stewardess's head sheared clean off from her still falling body.

"The fuck you are!" Caleb replied. "Don't you know who I am? I'll fucking have you killed!"

The blonde stewardess had scrambled to her feet in the galley and suddenly flung herself at Caleb. He ducked aside and she stumbled past, into the cockpit. Caleb slammed the cockpit door and latched it.

"Holy shit!" Alex heard the pilot shout. "Put her on autopilot. Fuck! Holy fucking shit!"

Then whatever he was saying deteriorated into wet tearing sounds and breathless growls. Alex felt the plane level out again.

"You idiot!" Butch shouted. "We're now trapped in a pilotless plane full of zombies. We're fucked!"

Jason stood and threw the table aside, advancing on Caleb.

"Jason," Caleb said, hands palm up. "Buddy, come on. It doesn't have to be this way. I can cut you in. We're talkin' points on the back end, baby. I can even arrange a co-producer credit."

Butch grabbed Alex and pulled her back. "We have to find the tape," he whispered, fumbling through cabinets around the big screen TV, still showing Caleb's sweaty, desperate face as Jason bore down on him.

"Don't you see," Caleb said. "I made you a star." Jason brought the machete down, chopping deeply into Caleb's neck, silencing the stream of bullshit finally and forever.

"Tape?" Alex frowned. "What tape?"

"The tape that proves I didn't kill those women." Butch finally found a latch that opened a narrow drawer beneath the screen. The screen went blank as Butch ejected the tape and pressed it into Alex's hand.

"You need to take this to Ace," Butch said. "Find Ace Asadoorian and give him this. He'll know what to do."

"What are you talking about?" Alex said with a cold wire of panic cinching down around her throat. "Why don't you give it to him?"

Butch pulled the hypodermic Dr Cain had given him from his hip pocket and uncapped the needle with his teeth.

"Because I have something else to take care of."

"What?" Alex said. "No, come on, we can both make it. We can use the parachutes."

"And then what?" Butch asked, eyes narrow and grim. "Then this plane keeps going until it runs out of gas and crashes in suburbia somewhere, unleashing the Jason Strain in America. Dr Cain's antivirus may have eliminated the virus in Costa Rica, but if it gets a fresh start in America, it's all over. We jump now and we buy ourselves a few weeks, maybe a month before the virus reaches Mexico. No." He shook his head. "Someone has to stay and make sure that the virus inside Jason is eradicated for good."

Butch pressed one of the orange parachutes into her chest. She took it and started cinching the straps around her body.

"Then do it and we can jump together," Alex said. "I won't leave you."

"You think he's gonna let me stick this in his eye?" Butch asked. "I'll get it in, but it's gonna be the last thing I do."

"No!" Alex shook her head, helpless tears flowing down her cheeks. "No, I promised I would never leave you!"

"I know," Butch said, taking her face in one hand and tilting it up to his, catching a tear on the ball of his thumb. "I know you did, Alex, and that's enough."

"But..."

"Go, now!" Butch cried, pushing her toward the door.

Alex let out a cry of anguish and ran for the door as Caleb's severed head went flying across the room and smashed into the dead television screen. She saw Jason advancing on Butch, who threw himself at Jason, wrapped his legs around Jason's chest and gripped the back of Jason's neck. The last thing that Alex saw was Butch turn to her as he jammed the hypo into Jason's eye. Butch's eyes were wide and terrified and she wanted to run to him, to save him somehow.

But the door was open and she was falling, falling into the night, and the plane burst into flames above her, like a brand new sun in the night sky.

EPILOGUE

When Alex walked into Ace Asadoorian's dojo, she felt as if she had walked a million miles. It wasn't the physical distance, it was the distance between the person she had been before all this started and the person she was now. She had read about her own death in a bus station in Laredo Texas, supposedly killed in the plane crash along with Butch Mahan and Caleb Carson. Looking into the wall of mirror on the far side of Ace's dojo, she almost believed that it was true.

Her hair was chopped short and bleached blonde and she wore blue contact lenses that she'd bought over the counter in a Mexican pharmacy. She had lost weight, and her face was tanned and gaunt with new lines etched around her eyes and mouth. She looked ten years older. The girl she had once been was truly dead. She still wasn't entirely sure who this new person was.

The journey had been far from easy. The late Dina had provided Alex with several different IDs and credit cards with different names, plus a large wad of hard American cash that certainly helped. But Alex was haunted by nightmares, tormented by memories and ground down with a hollow empty ache in her heart. She saw herself leaving Butch behind on that plane over and over and she wished fervently that she had found a way to tell him how she felt about him, to break through her stupid pride and say those dangerous little words that still seemed stuck like broken glass inside her throat.

It was too late. She would have to live the rest of her life with that regret.

Since she had been unable to tell Butch that she loved him, she had been determined to fulfill his last wish at all costs. To find Ace and give him the tape, to clear Butch's name once and for all. When she saw the sign for Ace's martial arts school, with its black ace of spades and the wide curving logo, she nearly burst into tears. She had to spend almost a half an hour standing by a bus stop down the block and trying to find a way to pull herself together to do what had to be done. When she went inside the school, she spotted an older man who had to be Ace standing on the far side of the dojo,

demonstrating some kind of wristlock for a young student. When he looked up and met Alex's intent gaze, he tilted his head, curious. Clearly he did not recognize her.

He did not look anything like Butch had described. His hair was thinner and shot through with gray, and his dark eyes did not sparkle with humor—they looked dull and distant.

"Can I help you, miss?" he asked, leaving his student and coming across the room to where Alex stood.

"Mr Asadoorian," Alex said. "Can I have a word with you? In private?"

He looked back over his shoulder at his fiercely grappling students.

"I am busy at the moment," he said.

"It's about Butch Mahan," she said softly. "I'm Alex Coyle. Butch and I were on *Xtreme Elimination* together. I have something you need to see."

He frowned, heavy eyebrows drawn together. "If you are a reporter, I have said all I will say."

Alex shook her head. "I have a message for you from Butch. Proof that he did not kill those women."

His frown deepened. "If this is some kind of a joke..."

"Please," Alex said. "It was his last wish that I bring you this." She held out the tape for him to see. "He loved you, Ace. He wanted so badly for you to see this. It will only take a minute."

He looked into her eyes for a long moment, then nodded slowly. He directed her into a tiny office and shut the door. He had a small television with a VCR and Alex handed him the tape. They both stood silent and watched the screen.

Alex had not watched the tape. She couldn't bear to. Seeing Butch again felt like a twisting razor in her chest. The furious anger on his face when Caleb admitted that he had set Butch up made her wish a thousand more deaths on that Hollywood shitheel. Again, she felt a profound wash of complex emotion engulf her. She did not even realize that she was crying until she saw that Ace was crying too, a thin sheen of tears in his narrow eyes.

"How could I have been so stupid?" Ace said, clenching a fist and slamming it into the scarred surface of the desk. "I should have

believed him. He was like a son to me, and I did not believe him."

Alex reached out and put her arms around the older man. "I loved him, too."

They held on to each other for a handful of heartbeats, two strangers who both loved the dead man on the little screen, and then Alex drew back and fisted the tears from her eyes.

"You take this tape to the authorities," Alex said. "Clear Butch's name."

"But what about you, Alex?" Ace asked. "Where will you go now?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't know."

"Will you come back and visit me sometime?" Ace asked. "Any friend of Butch is a friend of mine. You like the AAFC? I will get you front row seats, okay?"

"Sure," Alex said, smiling slightly. "I'll see you later, Ace."

As she left the dojo, she thought of how badly she had wanted to be independent, to start her life over, to be her own woman. Well, now that she had her wish, she had no idea what to do with her newfound independence. It was tempting to stay with Ace, to let him take her under his wing, but'd she fought too hard to let herself fall back into her old ways. She needed a fresh start. New York was a big, anonymous city. It was as good place to start over. She found a subway station and headed into Manhattan.

As the train thundered through its tunnels, Alex found her mind returning again and again to that awful night. The terror of the fall through the cold night sky. The awkward, painful landing and the sonic Armageddon of the plane crashing down in the moonlit desert. She remembered staggering up and over a rocky ridge, and seeing the flaming debris spread out like glowing jewels across the sand. There was almost nothing left but large jagged chunks of metal like the shell of an enormous broken egg, and a few barbecued chunks of meat and bone that could have been anyone. Nothing even remotely recognizable as a body. But there was one thing that she saw that night that would haunt her nightmares for the rest of her life. Large, burning footprints leading away from the crash site, into the wild and endless desert.

There was only one person who could have possibly walked away from a crash like that. The Jason Strain may have been dead, but Jason himself was still out there somewhere. Alex knew in her heart that there could be no starting over while Jason still walked the earth. That she would have no peace until she sent that masked nightmare back to whatever corner of darkest hell had spawned him.

She would have her work cut out.